

# (un)Redact the Facts in the Art Museum World: A Great Step in the Evolution of Museum Interpretations with Room for Growth at the American Folk Art Museum



“Unnamed Figures: Black Presence and Absence in the Early American North” was on view at the [American Folk Art Museum](#) (AFAM) from November 15, 2023, to March 24, 2024, and opened with a bang. I loved it.

The introductory interpretative panel for the exhibit sets the tone for what the visitor will experience for the next one to two hours: a fuller story about the artwork that depicts the history of the early American North. I commend the racially diverse curatorial team on their efforts in evolving museum interpretation with racially equitable grammar and language that tells a fuller story for restorative justice in the museum and history fields. While there is much to applaud, the Black figures are not the only “unnamed figures” in this exhibit. For true restorative justice, missing are the White historians and museum professionals who caused the Black figures to be labeled as “unnamed” for professionals and the general public to hold them accountable for their actions.



Figure 1: Rufus Hathaway (1770–1822), *A View of Mr. Joshua Winsor's House &c.*, Duxbury, Massachusetts c. 1793–1795, oil on canvas, American Folk Art Museum, gift of Ralph Esmerian, 2013.1.19.

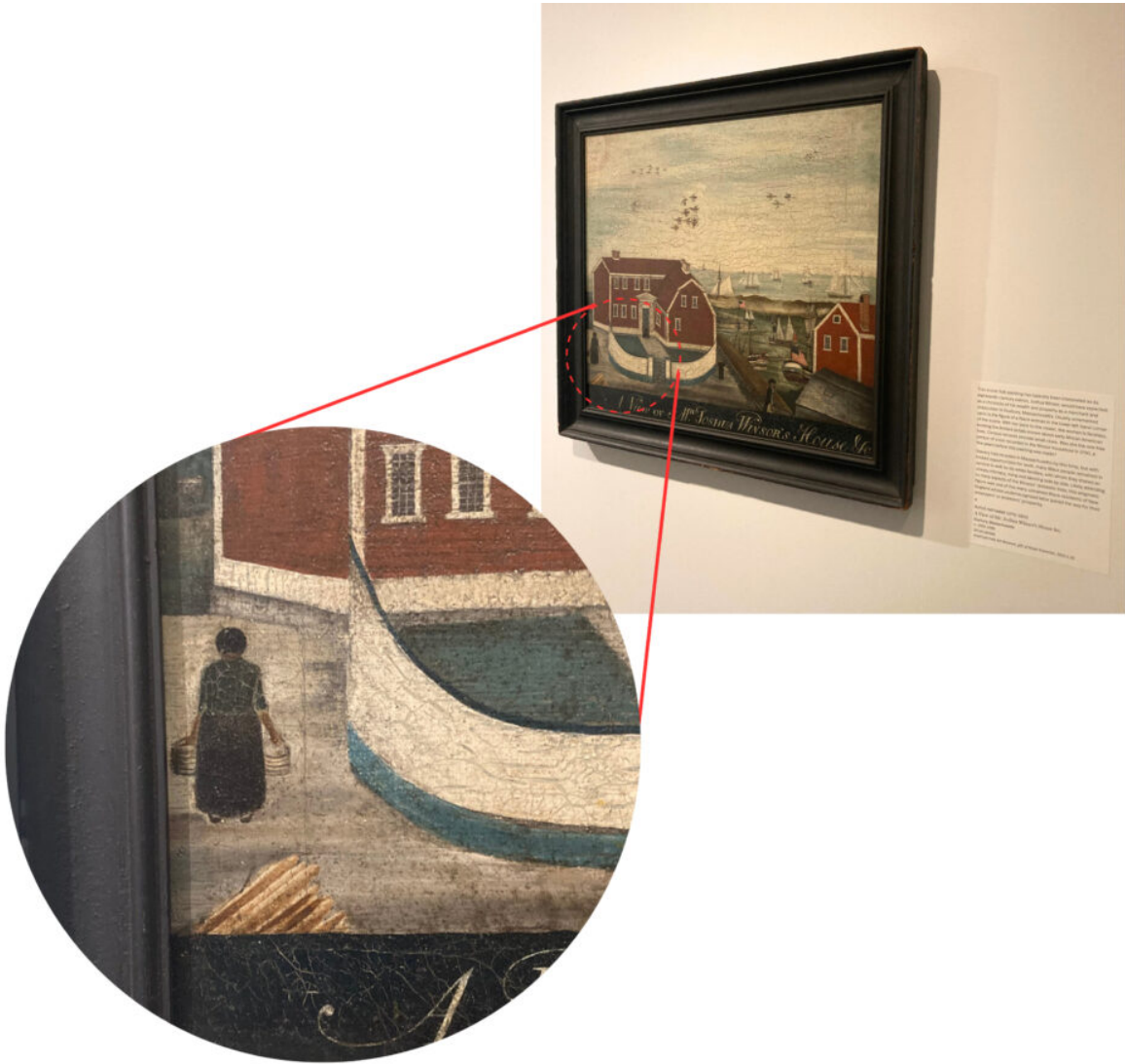


Figure 2: *A View of Mr. Joshua Winsor's House &c.*, by Rufus Hathaway (1770-1822), photo and illustration. Credit: k. Kennedy Whitters, 2023.

There is so much to share about what I enjoyed during my museum visit on December 27, 2023. First, as a researcher, narrative consultant, and advocate of grammar and language in history communications to tell a fuller history, I commend the museum on their meta approach to context and nuance with this exhibit. I refer to this grammar and language as “(un)redacted grammar and language” because they do not obscure who did what to whom. In comparison, redacted grammar and language, like the passive voice, omits the doer of an action, most often, the perpetrator of violence or a crime in a sentence.

An example of the (un)redacted grammar and language that I observed in the exhibit: interpretive signs that named who enslaved the Black people featured in the art. For example, the sign that accompanied the ceramic pottery of the

Black New York City potter and businessman Thomas W. Commeraw included the White man who enslaved him, a fellow potter, a White man, and a German immigrant to the US named William Crolius:

For decades, a misreading of Thomas W. Commeraw's name led art historians to assume that he was of European descent. In fact, he was African American, formerly enslaved by potter William Crolius.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading the semi-indictment of historians who, for decades, assumed that Mr. Commeraw was of European descent because they misread his name. Note that I say "semi-indictment"—keep reading until the end to learn why.

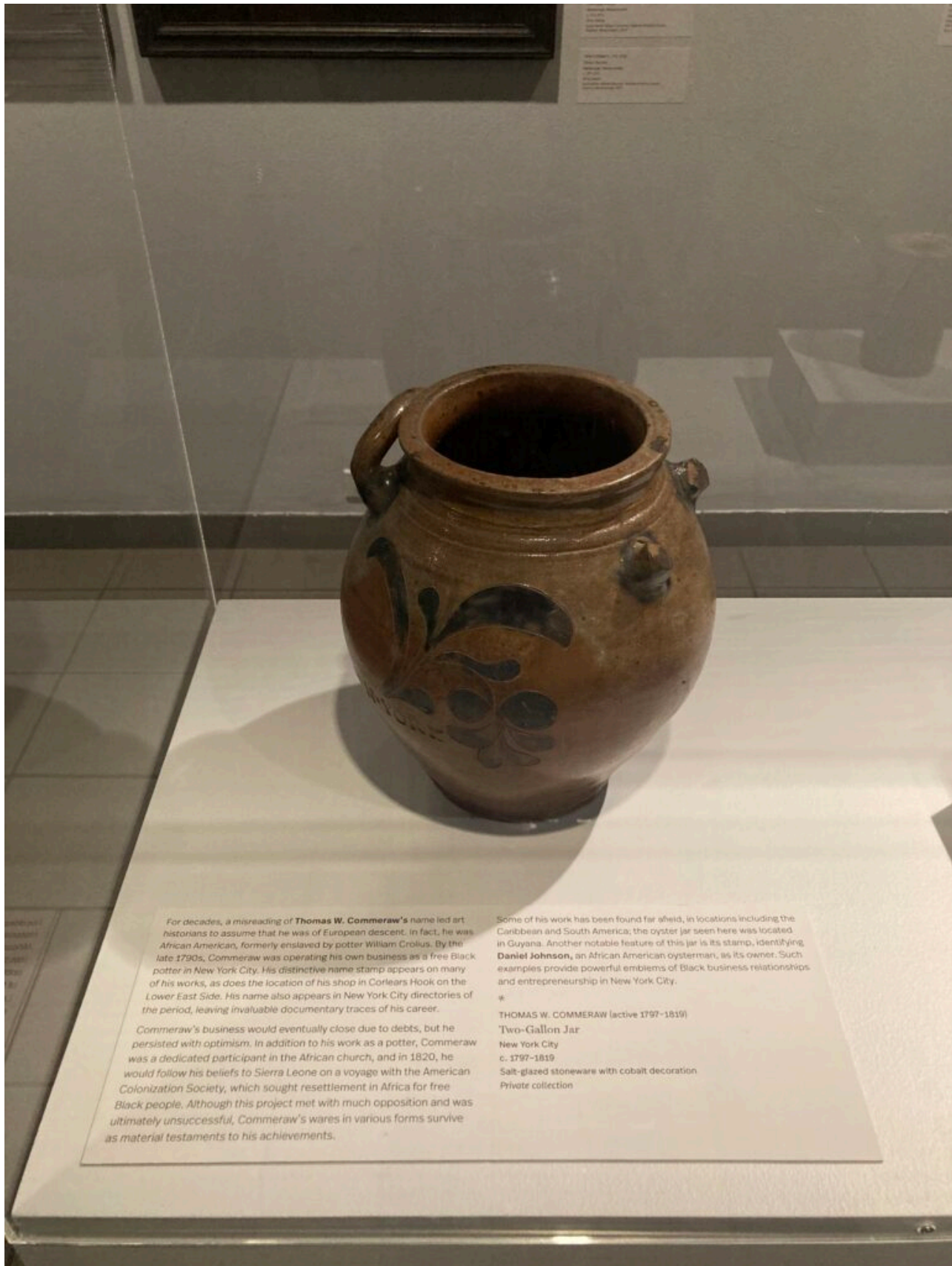


Figure 3: "Two-gallon jar," (salt-glazed stoneware with cobalt decoration) by Thomas W. Commeraw (1797-1819). Photo credit: k. kennedy Whilters, 2023.

As a historic preservation architect, it was a treat to see that the AFAM

curatorial team included the surviving remains of a cemetery headstone. What's more, the accompanying interpretive sign highlighted the commercial development threats that burial grounds of enslaved and free Black people continue to face in the US. Although, the stone appeared to be in the way of traffic—in the name of life safety, the architect in me notes circulation paths whenever I am in a public or private space and if they are efficient for human travel. Plus, I viewed this section as curators paying homage to the Black ancestors whom White people enslaved whom the curators included in the exhibit. To me, it read as a shrine, and I treated it, to the best of my ability, as such, sitting on the one bench in this part of the exhibit and reflecting on the lives of the names that AFAM printed in the round object hovering over the headstone. Something like this, well, shrine, deserved a niche for quiet reflection on the lives of the unnamed, now-named Black figures.



Figure 4: Installation photo. Photo credit: Eva Cruz, EveryStory, 2023.

As a Black woman, without reading the interpretive sign before reading the inscription on the headstone, I felt it in my body, the weight of what I was looking at. The stone marked the final resting place in North Kingstown, Rhode Island, of two Black male teenagers, Lonnon and Hagar. As someone inscribed on the stone, perhaps a fellow enslaved Black person, these teens were servants to a man named Christopher Phillips. With this and everything I just shared, this shrine deserved to be in a more sacred place than in the middle of the circulation path.

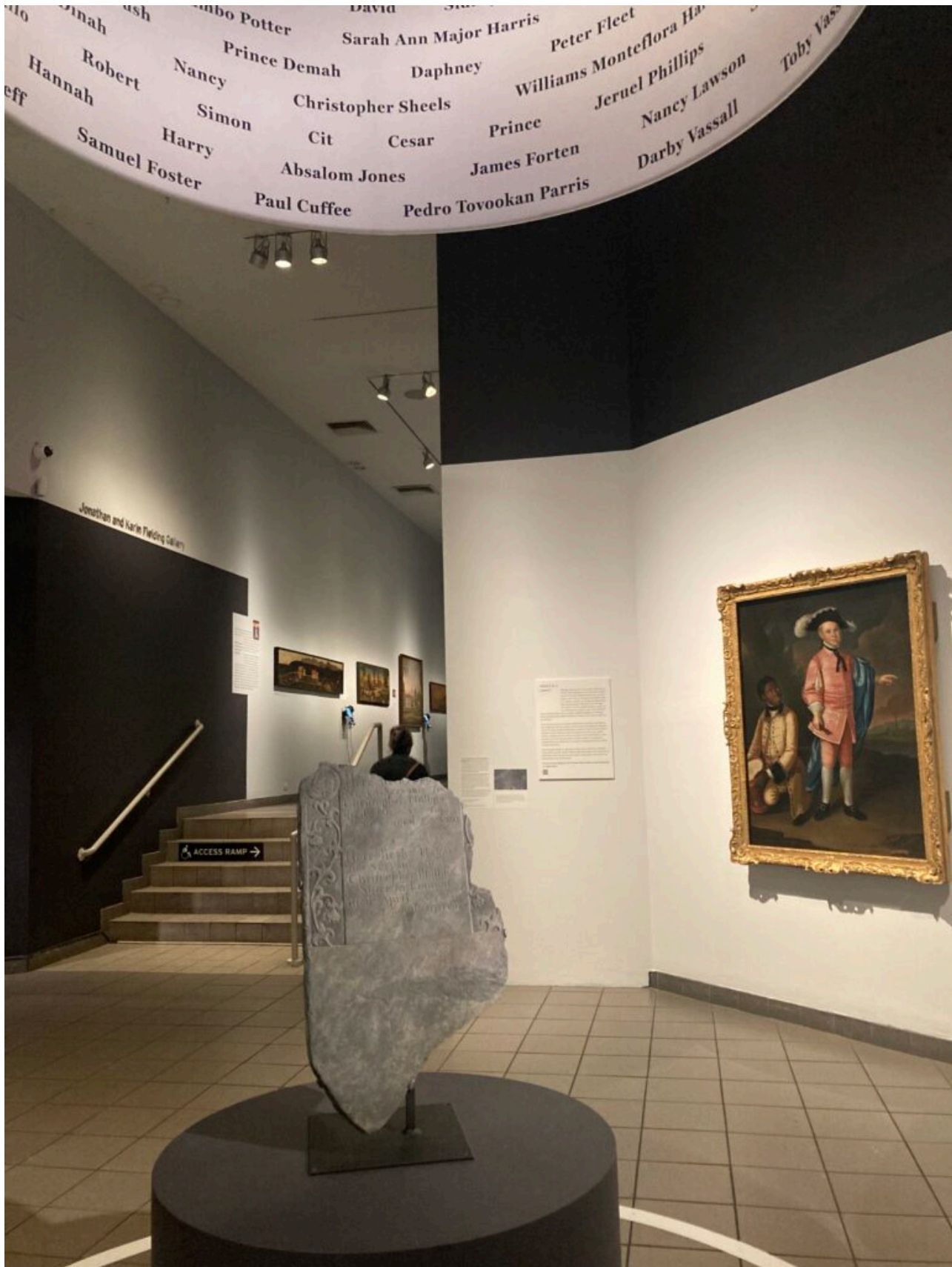


Figure 5: "Headstone for Lonnon and Hagar," slate (1727). Photo credit: k. Kennedy Whitters, 2023.

With this in mind, I would have placed the headstone with the names hovering

above it in the nook that includes the exhibit about great Black craftspeople, creatives, scientists, and inventors like Phillis Wheatley and Benjamin Banneker. To maximize space, in the former site of the headstone, I would have removed some of the paintings on the wall. I say this because the greatest shift in the narrative about Black people that we need is about our intelligence—we need more attention placed on all of the inventions we developed in the early years of the United States and more emphasis on our creativity.

With “Unnamed Figures,” AFAM aligns with a burgeoning trend by other peer museums nationwide in their evolution of interpretations of legacy works. The exhibit, in its language guide about their reason for not capitalizing the “w” in White people, referenced the Baltimore Museum of Art’s language updates to their interpretation:

It can be appropriate and, indeed, restorative for curators to reconsider and update the title of an object—as in the case of the Baltimore Museum of Art’s recently retitled portrait “Charles Calvert and Once-Known Enslaved Attendant,” which has been known throughout its history by a variety of titles, including “Charles Calvert” and “Charles Calvert and His Slave.”

For “Unnamed Figure,” AFAM chose not to follow the route of BMA and instead kept the past title. They explained:

In the context of this loan-based project, we have chosen to provide past assigned titles as a reflection of the objects’ multilayered histories within multiple collections.

To educate the public even further about their language choices, AFAM complemented the exhibit with a language guide, accessible via a QR code on the “what’s in a name?” sign that takes viewers to the language guide in the Bloomberg Connects App. I commend them for this educational technology integration. While the exhibit is no longer at AFAM, if you are interested in viewing it, there is a virtual walkthrough of the exhibit on [Vimeo](#).

A key component of the language guide explains the capitalization of the “B” in Black people and the choice to lowercase the “w” in White people. Understandably, AFAM’s reason for using White people with a lowercase “w” is to distance themselves from the practice of self-proclaimed white nationalists who capitalize the “W” in White people to assert the superiority of the White race. However, what we concede when lowercasing the “w” in White people are: (1) white supremacy is only something that white supremacists can do (it is not, white supremacy is a spectrum of human behavior that does more harm than good such as perfectionism), and (2) white nationalists have the power to control the narrative about race.

Capitalizing the “W” in White people does convey the power of whiteness, as it should, not from a white nationalist perspective, but because the power of whiteness is so subtle in our society, it is the air we breathe. There is



[behavioral science](#) to support this claim. Yet we, especially White people, do not interrogate the power of their whiteness enough. And therefore, whiteness negatively affects the lives of people who are not White on a regular basis, for centuries, as evidenced in the interpretations in this exhibit. So, for us to see it as the powerful negative force that it is, this narrative that “White people and anyone who appears to be as White as possible are a standard for goodness, intelligence, and who is safe,” we must capitalize the “W” in White.

This practice of unredacting the facts of artwork and objects to tell a fuller story about them is prominent in AFAM’s peer museums in New York as well. As Karen Rosenberg shared in her review of the exhibit, [“Now, Black Figures Have a Name, a Frame and a Show”](#):

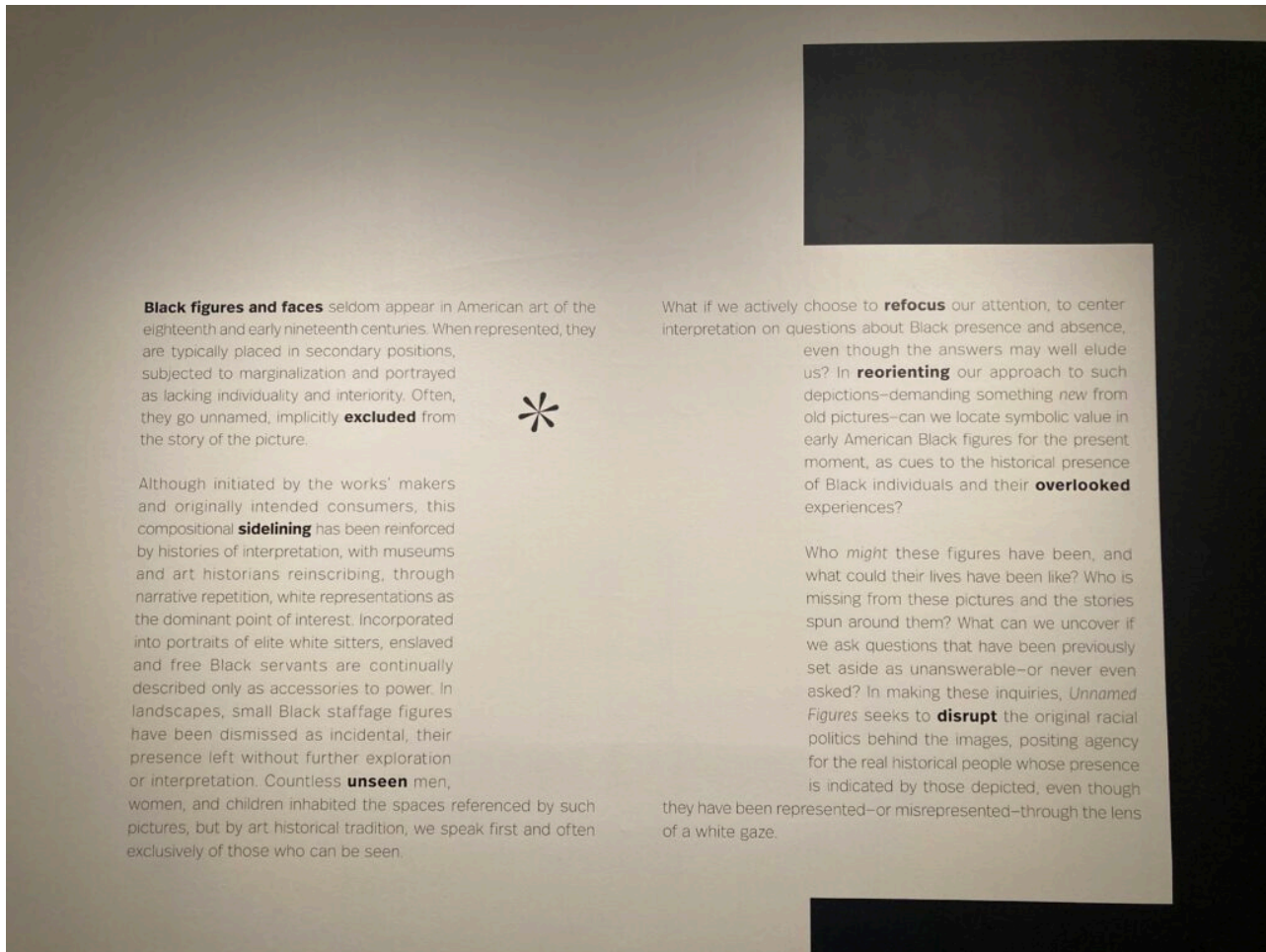
Even as New York’s museums deliver a season of exhibitions in which the Black figure is emphatically, profoundly present, these institutions are reckoning with legacies of absence, invisibility and anonymity.

The article states that New York’s museums are, “reckoning with legacies of absence, invisibility, and anonymity.” But are the American Folk Art Museum with “Unnamed Figures,” and other museums really “reckoning with legacies of absence, invisibility, and anonymity,” if those who committed the erasure, White curators, collectors, and art historians, remain unnamed figures in the exhibits, redacted?

AFAM opens the exhibit with the following paragraph that makes no mention of who unnamed the figures:

Black figures and faces seldom appear in American art of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. When represented, they are typically placed in secondary positions, subjected to marginalization and portrayed as lacking individuality and interiority. Often, they go unnamed, implicitly excluded from the story of the picture.

AFAM filled the exhibit’s interpretive signs with one of the most prolific forms of redacted grammar and language, the passive voice, written from the perspective of a third-person narrator who omits themselves from what they are witnessing. In this, the narrator, a White curator or someone adhering to white supremacist ideology has removed the White museum professionals from the erasure of Black figures and faces.



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Although initiated by the works' makers and originally intended consumers, this compositional **sidelining** has been reinforced by histories of interpretation, with museums and art historians reinscribing, through narrative repetition, white representations as the dominant point of interest. Incorporated into portraits of elite white sitters, enslaved and free Black servants are continually described only as accessories to power. In landscapes, small Black staffage figures have been dismissed as incidental, their presence left without further exploration or interpretation. Countless **unseen** men, women, and children inhabited the spaces referenced by such pictures, but by art historical tradition, we speak first and often exclusively of those who can be seen.

What if we actively choose to **refocus** our attention, to center interpretation on questions about Black presence and absence, even though the answers may well elude us? In **reorienting** our approach to such depictions—demanding something *new* from old pictures—can we locate symbolic value in early American Black figures for the present moment, as cues to the historical presence of Black individuals and their **overlooked** experiences?

Who *might* these figures have been, and what could their lives have been like? Who is missing from these pictures and the stories spun around them? What can we uncover if we ask questions that have been previously set aside as unanswerable—or never even asked? In making these inquiries, *Unnamed Figures* seeks to **disrupt** the original racial politics behind the images, positing agency for the real historical people whose presence is indicated by those depicted, even though

they have been represented—or misrepresented—through the lens of a white gaze.

Figure 6: Introductory panel of the “Unnamed Figures” exhibit. Photo credit: k. Kennedy Whitters, 2023.

Is the *New York Times* article telling a fuller story about the exhibit if it does not investigate why an exhibit like this exists, why White curators, collectors, and art historians erase, or perhaps more specifically, ignore the Black people and the context of enslavement in artwork? Do we truly grasp why “Unnamed Figures” matters without this context and how to prevent White people and others from repeating race-based ignorance in our collective memory and in the archives? Without this context, in the article and in the exhibit, clearly stating the race of the curators, collectors, and art historians, we as a collective society are missing a fuller story about the “Unnamed Figures.” And we are missing the true restorative justice in the archives that we deserve.



Figure 7: Installation photo. Photo credit: Eva Cruz, EveryStory, 2023.

As a Black person who left “Unnamed Figures” feeling a sense of healing and uplift from this attempt at truth-telling in museum interpretation, this missing piece of accountability in the story would have made me feel whole.

While the *New York Times* article described one section of the exhibit uplifting—the section about Black makers—as a Black person who has never experienced an exhibit like this before, one that provided so much context about the artwork with such nuance about white supremacy and enslavement, the entire exhibit was uplifting to me because of this truth-telling in museum interpretation. I recommend this exhibit, and, to enhance your museum exhibit, I recommend downloading the Bloomberg App, where you will have access to the exhibit guide.



Figure 8: Installation photo. Photo credit: Eva Cruz, EveryStory, 2023.

My only other note is on the name of the exhibit itself. As with the interpretative signs that give details about each section of the exhibit, the name itself does not hold enough accountability for the historians, curators, and archivists, and thus lacks what is truly needed for restorative justice for harm caused in these incomplete archival practices. Perhaps, “Unnamed Figures: Black Presence and Redaction in the Early American North” or “Unnamed Figures: Black Presence and Erasure in the Early American North” are better fits as the words “Redaction” and “Erasure” are forms of the verbs to redact and to erase, both of which communicate intentional action to withhold information, which is what the White historians and museum professionals did in the past.

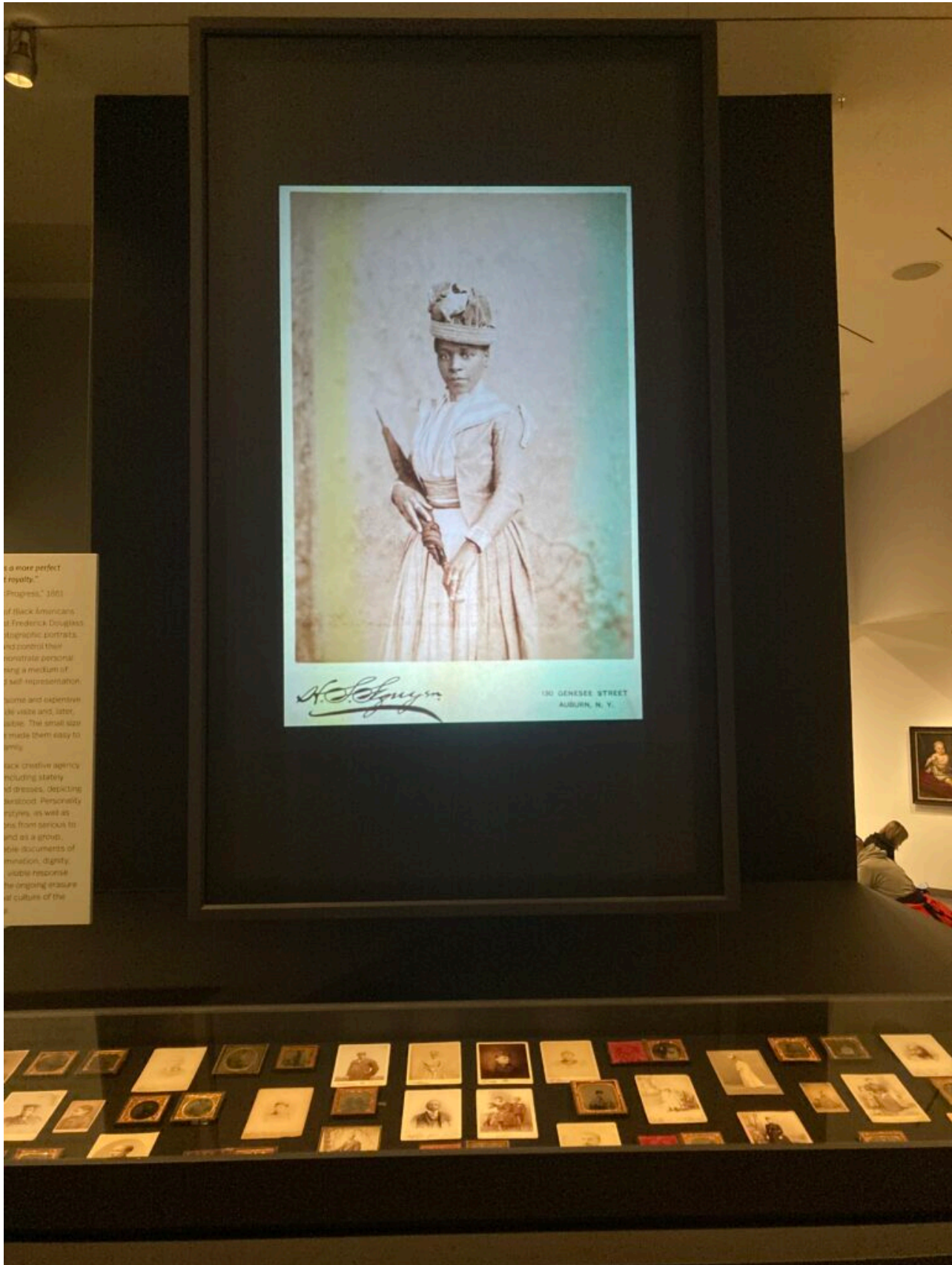


Figure 9: *Photograph of a Black woman with hat and umbrella*, by H. Seymour Squyer (1880). Photo credit: k. kennedy Whriters, 2023.

Thinking back on the exhibit, I love how the curators concluded it with a

statement on Black people's desire to control or reclaim the narrative about them. From the exhibit, I learned that we asserted our agency of self through portrait photography. At the time, in the late 1800s, Black people trusted photography more than portraiture because, from their perspective, given the prevalence of White people's derogatory depictions of Black people at the time, blackface in particular, a photograph was independent of the lens through which White people chose to see Black people, a lens of inferiority to them. Weeks after visiting the exhibit, I see that my writing of this review and the advocacy in how society tells the story about the Black experience is in the same spirit of the Black ancestors in attempting to control or reclaim the narrative about us.

## Further Reading

American Folk Art Museum, ["Virtual Insights: Reasserting Black Presence in the Early American North,"](#) Vimeo, April 17, 2024.

["News: American Folk Art Museum,"](#) American Folk Art Museum, accessed December 27, 2023.

Jeff Richman, Christine Hanauer, Jim Crolius, Kimberly Vickers, William Liebeknecht, Rick Ciralli RCGLASS, Joe DeSanto, Joan Smitt, Lawrence Duffee, and Meta Janowitz, ["Crolius Potters,"](#) Green-Wood Cemetery, accessed February 13, 2012.

Karen Rosenberg, ["Now, Black Figures Have a Name, a Frame and a Show,"](#) *New York Times*, December 21, 2023.

k. kennedy Whriters, ["Redacted: A Grammar + Language Survey,"](#) Redacted: a Grammar + Language Survey, accessed January 17, 2024.

k. kennedy Whriters, ["White with a Capital 'W,'"](#) Substack, accessed January 17, 2024.

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