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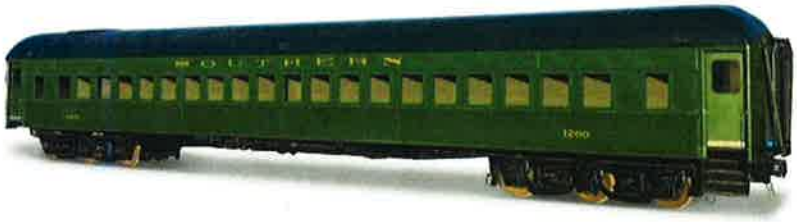
National Museum of African American History and Culture Review: A Moving but Flawed Accounting of History

The latest addition to the Smithsonian family is illuminating, disturbing, moving—and flawed.



Jim-Crow-era railway car *PHOTO: SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE*

By **EDWARD ROTHSTEIN**

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Washington

In 2005, when Lonnie Bunch was appointed founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, there was no building, no site, no collection and no money. Now, there is a $540 million museum (that figure including money for an endowment) scheduled to open on Sept. 24, so filled with detail and narrative that even a full day's visit is insufficient for a careful survey. That alone is an imposing

achievement. And if the 12 exhibitions that now make up the museum are not all overwhelming, there is so much here—and so much to think about—that the experience still leaves an indelible mark.

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Here are centuries-old ankle shackles used by African slaveholders for marching their African chattel to the coast where European traders awaited. Here, too, is a hull fragment from one of those slave ships, only recently rescued from the watery grave to which it dragged more than 200 African slaves in 1794. And a transplanted 19th-century South Carolina cabin within which slaves once gathered. There is also a shawl given to Harriet Tubman by Queen Victoria of England, Louis Armstrong's trumpet, Nat Turner's Bible, Chuck Berry's Cadillac, a dress made by Rosa Parks, Muhammad Ali's robe, puppets in minstrel blackface, and costumes from the 1975 all-black show "The Wiz." The museum's lower two floors—more than half the museum is below ground—recount the history of slavery in the U.S. and use the vast space for artifacts, including a Jim-Crow-era railway car. The top two floors celebrate what has been made by African-Americans when so little was given and so little expected—an astonishing roster in music, art, theater, sports, business and politics.

The museum is illuminating, disturbing, moving—and flawed. It is a premier example of a certain kind of museum that has come to maturity during the past 15 years: the "Identity Museum." That genre may be as definitive for our era as museums defined by Enlightenment or Imperial projects were for centuries past.

The Identity Museum is devoted to recounting the struggles and triumphs of a people whose place in the larger society is, at first, barely tolerated. They arrive without resources or language; face hostility or worse; then gradually carve a place for themselves—discovering their identity. With some variation, this narrative has appeared in recent museums devoted to Japanese-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Arab-Americans, Jewish-Americans, Chinese-Americans and American Indians.

In this case, of course, the history is so grievous partly because slavery involves the destruction of all previous identity. In this case, too, the enslavement coincided with the onset of modernity so slavery—a commonplace in world history—became a central aspect of world commerce for the first time. As the exhibition makes clear, by 1860 the

value assigned to four million U.S. slaves reached nearly $3 billion (estimates vary). Mortgages existed on slaves; slaves were used as collateral.

Iron shackles (before 1860) *PHOTO: SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE*

The humanscost was immense, and the pain is inescapable as details accumulate. By the time we reach more recent history, the pattern is clear: Reconstruction is followed by deconstruction and distrust (a pattern that continues to be the way many racial problems are interpreted even today).

But despite all this, African-Americans were, as an exhibition title says, "Making a Way Out of No Way": We see the evolution of African-American newspapers, businesses, churches and other institutions. Galleries devoted to music and sports make it plain how much African-American history and culture is simply American history and culture.

Unfortunately, because of the way the museum was conceived, there are problems. The music gallery, for example, is divided into sections ("Folk," "Rock & Roll," "Hip Hop") with displays dedicated to individual artists, showing, perhaps, an article of distinctive clothing or a musical instrument. Very little detail is provided about the musicians and their places in popular (and classical) traditions. What is missing is some sense of historical perspective; the effect is like listening to someone saying "and . . . and . . . and . . ." in conversation as celebrations go on without pause.

This is partly because so much of the museum grows out of the Identity model, in which history plays a subsidiary role and self-celebration is the main point. One exception here is "Power of Place," an exhibition that surveys 10 geographical areas of some importance in African-American culture and history—including the rice fields of South Carolina; Jim-Crow-era life in Greenville Miss., as documented by a commercial

photographer, H.C. Anderson; and Oak Bluffs in Martha's Vineyard, Mass., which has been a summer destination for well-heeled African-Americans.

But the celebratory approach also affects the strictly historical sequences in the museum, stripping them of complications. The discussion of early slavery, for example, does not explain much about the African context (or the Arab slave trade). Later, the museum's description of Jefferson's slaves doesn't come close to the subtle analysis this same museum put into an earlier exhibition it had overseen at the American History museum while waiting for its new home.

Trumpet owned by Louis Armstrong. *PHOTO: SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE*

We also don't even get to know the individuals featured in the exhibition; after a visit here, it would be difficult to give any real account of Frederick Douglass or W.E.B. Du Bois or any more recent political figures. There is reluctance, too, to cast doubt on one perspective or another, or to give a nuanced assessment of conflicts. The actual doctrines of Elijah Muhammad, a leader of the Nation of Islam and mentor to Malcolm X, are unmentioned. And, more troubling, the Black Panthers are characterized as if they were defensively armed social workers, a PC view of radicalism that recurs in other contexts.

There are times, too, when advocacy clouds terminology. The horrific "race riots" of the early 20th century in cities like Tulsa, Okla., in which African-Americans were attacked, are described in some detail, but the riots of the late 1960s that destroyed the urban life of many American cities are called "urban rebellions."

Mr. Bunch has said of the museum: "We felt it was really important to take on things that might be deemed controversial or difficult." But that would have also meant shedding, in part, the Identity Museum model for something else that may one day

evolve. Until such a change takes place, prepare to be underwhelmed about some things but solemnly overwhelmed by others.

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