

Exit Through the National Gift Shop: The Not So Black and White Issue of the Black Neighborhood Museum Movement, “New Integration,” and the Paradoxes of the National African American History and Culture Museum

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Introduction

ON September 24, 2016, the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), colloquially known as the Blacksonian, first opened its doors to the public.¹ Its existence is the product of almost 100 years of civil rights activism and legislation beginning in 1915. However, its stately setting on the National Mall and its position as the nineteenth museum of the Smithsonian Institution mean that it should not be viewed as a static repository of the past, but as a dynamic institution through which history, the present, and emerging futures can be critically examined.² NMAAHC is the living product of a century of cultural, ideological, and political negotiations among African Americans seeking to claim their rightful place in the history and narrative of white America. The paper contends that NMAAHC is simultaneously a culmination of the Black neighborhood museum movement and a departure from it. By institutionalizing African American history within a patriotic, state-sanctioned framework aimed at healing and national integration, the museum gains unprecedented visibility and symbolic power. However, it also sacrifices the original radical, separatist capacity of neighborhood museums to fully confront the historical violence and ongoing racial inequality that have plagued America since her founding, thereby leaving the deceptive, dominant national narrative largely intact.

To do this, it is essential to begin by examining the emergence of African American neighborhood museums in the early twentieth century as direct responses to exclusion from dominant white academic and cultural institutions. These museums, such as the early Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, functioned not only as community spaces but as sites for cultivating Black Power, cultural pride, and intellectual autonomy through both formal separatist curatorial practices and informal storytelling outside of white control.

As these museums grew out of local communities, persistent demands for national recognition and resources compelled them to engage with white America. The struggle to establish the National Museum of African American History and Culture illustrates how fraught this engagement became, highlighting the stakes of who holds and validates curatorial authority, the integration of national mythology, and the negotiation of cultural representation. Even after Congress formally chartered NMAAHC, these tensions remained unresolved, forcing the museum to navigate between remaining true to the ethos of neighborhood-based Black Power inspired museums and fulfilling its role as a national institution integrating African American history into the broader, inauthentically positive,

¹“About the Museum,” National Museum of African American History and Culture, nmaahc.si.edu/about/about-museum.

²National Archives Foundation, “National Museum of African American History and Culture Act.”

narrative of the United States.

These tensions were intensified by NMAAHC's intentional placement within the symbolic landscape of the National Mall in Washington, DC, making visible, both architecturally and curatorially, the friction between presenting an authentic African American experience and conforming to a sanitized, patriotic national narrative. As a Smithsonian institution situated at the heart of the nation's symbolic center, the museum undertakes the massive task of fundamentally reshaping the representation of African American history. It undertakes a project, coined by Dr. Lonnie Bunch III, of "new integration," navigating the ideological and curatorial challenge of translating the legacy of Black neighborhood museums into a state-sanctioned, national framework designed to reintegrate African American history into the broader American story.

Finally, this paper evaluates NMAAHC and its efforts as both a monumental success and a deeply constrained, and at times misleading, institution. On the one hand, NMAAHC stands as more than a museum; it is a monument to the African American experience and a constant reminder to the nation, yet it also falls victim to the pursuit of a nationalistic reintegration narrative through its propagandistic retelling of American history. In doing so, it argues that the project of "new integration" remains unresolved, revealing the ongoing tension between historical truth, national narrative, and the unfinished work of reckoning and restorative justice.

II. The Beginnings of a Movement: African American Neighborhood Museums

In 1915, veterans of the Civil War, both North and South, gathered in Washington, DC, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the war's end. Unlike the Grand Review of Armies in 1865, both white and Black veterans of the Union, as well as white veterans of the Confederacy, were allowed to participate in the Grand Review Parade, and yet throughout the celebrations, Black Union soldiers were treated as second-class citizens.³ To ensure a more respectful recognition of the contributions of Black soldiers and citizens, and to provide future support in the form of food and accommodation, the Colored Citizens Committee (CCC) was created. After raising funds within the encampment of soldiers, the CCC formed the National Memorial Association, NMA, to begin calls the very next year for the creation of a memorial statue to honor those African American soldiers who had fought and died for the Union.⁴ However, in 1920, its goals soon changed to the creation of a memorial building. The building was to be more than simply a memorial; it was to serve as an "educational center giving inspiration and pride to the present and future generations that they may be inspired to follow the examples of those who have aided in the advancement of the race and Nation."⁵ Calls for the construction of this building marked the first step in a hundred year journey toward establishing the National Museum of African American History and Culture, aiming to recognize and celebrate the African American experience in the United States. Although momentum for a national memorial soon waned, African American communities across the country began cultivating a grassroots alternative, the "neighborhood museum" movement, that would lay the groundwork for future national recognition.

The "neighborhood museum" was a concept utterly distinct from the elite white-centric museums of the mid-1900s. As John Kinard, Director of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in Washington, described them, the neighborhood museum "encompasses the life of the people of the

³Akiko Ochiai, "A 'New Integration' of Memory in the National Museum of African American History and Culture," *Japanese Journal of American Studies* no. 29 (2016): 92.

⁴NMAAHC, "A Century in the Making: The Journey to Build a National Museum," Tumblr, August 24, 2016, <https://nmaahc.tumblr.com/post/149430396115/a-century-in-the-making-the-journey-to-build-a>

⁵NMAAHC, "A Century in the Making."

neighborhood—people who are vitally concerned about who they are, where they came from, what they have accomplished, their values and their most pressing needs.”⁶ While major institutions focused on collecting Western canon items of value and amassing complete collections, neighborhood museums were designed to be produced from and serve their distinct communities. Eschewing conventional Western curatorial frameworks and the need to be an academic institution to claim the title of museum, these institutions arose organically from communities determined to preserve and share their history and culture on their own terms. Artifacts came directly from individual families living in the community, staff were volunteers, and exhibitions were designed to almost the personal level to serve the communities in which they existed.⁷ In contrast, white cultural institutions in the early 1970s had barely begun to recognize the value of exhibiting African American history and culture, let alone the value of collecting and conserving artifacts of the African American experience.

Moreover, the erasure of the African American experience occurred even when the subject matter of the exhibitions was predominantly Black. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969, in a time of widespread national upheaval, the exhibition “*Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America*” debuted, showcasing artistic, intellectual, and social institutions based in Harlem.⁸ Not only were African Americans portrayed as almost inhuman curiosities for study, but there was a profound absence of actual African-American-made art, music, or culture. Protests followed the exhibition’s debut, and yet while many were outraged, significant discussion revolved around the belief that the MET, and museums as spaces at large, should be above politics.⁹ However, museums have never been able to be “above politics.” The choices institutions make through collection, curation, contextualization, and community engagement fundamentally shape our civic lives as we are explicitly and implicitly told who is and is not included and what history is essential, relevant, and valuable to our lives. As the African American poet June Jordan wrote, “Take me into the museum and show me myself, show me my people, show me soul America. if you cannot show me myself, if you cannot teach my people what they need to know—and they need to know the truth, and they need to know that nothing is more important than human life—then why shouldn’t I attack the temples of America.”¹⁰ If cultural institutions, especially those that control the national narrative of value in art and history, are unable to tell the stories and reflect the lives of African Americans, then they serve to reject African Americans’ belonging in our “imagined communities” of a nation, let alone even begin the project of their proper integration into the country.¹¹

Thus, it is essential not to underestimate the power of these neighborhood museums and the vacuum that they were filling. Regardless of their funding, which was usually meager, they served to help African Americans “acquire greater self-respect, strengthen their sense of dignity and independence, and work toward a heightened sense of communal and civic identity.” In an American cultural landscape that rejected their history and culture at every level, the neighborhood museum functioned as a safe space for self-determination, a celebration of blackness, and a way to find freedom and separation from the dominant white culture.¹²

In 1966, Stockley Carmichael coined the term Black Power, and since then, it has conjured iconic images of the Black Panthers, Dashikis, raised fists, Huey Newton, and more. Yet this viewing of Black Power is reductionist, as it confines the goals to simply complete Black separatism from white

⁶Andrea A. Burns, *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2020), 15.

⁷Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 15.

⁸Denise D. Meringolo, *Radical Roots: Public History and a Tradition of Social Justice Activism* (Amherst College Press, 2021).

⁹Meringolo, *Radical Roots*.

¹⁰Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 2.

¹¹Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 1.

¹²Meringolo, *Radical Roots*.

America and a commitment to constant racial struggle.¹³ These two goals are critical, but Black Power also refers to the ongoing project of “cultivat[ing] an assertive identity and cultural pride” in blackness.¹⁴ Though this is related to separatism from white America, it deserves to be viewed within its own right, as it makes the intersection between the museum and Black Power movements obvious. Through the carving out of free spaces, both physically and ideologically, in the cultural and political landscape, museums provide space and support for Black dignity, independence, and self-definition unrestrained by the white majority.¹⁵ Thus, even though the Black Power movement, specifically the more militant factions, began to fall apart in the mid-1970s, the project of Black cultural liberation, visibility, and freedom from the dominant white narrative continued through neighborhood museums.

The DuSable Museum of African American History is one of four institutions that undergirded this Black neighborhood museum movement, the others being the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, the International Afro-American Museum, and the African American Museum of Philadelphia.¹⁶

Originally the Ebony Museum of History and Art, the DuSable Museum was established by Margaret and Charles Burroughs and opened to the public in 1961. It was the archetype of what a neighborhood museum should be and should do. Not only were most of the employees volunteers from the South Side of Chicago, where DuSable was located, but the exhibitions and collections “drew their inspiration from the present-day concerns and forgotten histories of the neighborhood, and the black community as a whole.”¹⁷ Moreover, the DuSable, like many neighborhood museums, was forced to rely on the generosity of its own constituents as it was generally unable to access public funds. Thus, it survived purely through small donations and gifts from community organizations, churches, and individuals. This community connection is essential to the soul of what the neighborhood museum movement was about, as made all the more clear by the phrasing in an advertisement placed in the Chicago Daily Defender (see fig. 1).¹⁸ By asking for pieces of history for their collection that other institutions of American history have traditionally ignored, The DuSable Museum proclaimed that these objects, and the history and stories that they held, are of great importance to the world and of worthy inclusion to the curatorial landscape.¹⁹ In this way, the DuSable and other neighborhood museums took on qualities similar to those of monuments to the African American experience through their very existence. The DuSable and other neighborhood museums not only asserted the value of African American history and culture outside white-controlled institutions but also created dedicated spaces where these stories could be preserved, celebrated, and experienced as vital parts of the broader American narrative. Yet, even as institutions like the DuSable and exhibitions such as the MET’s Harlem on My Mind emerged concurrently, meaningful engagement between the realms of Black power, identity, and self-determination and the dominant white national narrative remained limited, with debate even within the African American community over how, or even if, these worlds should intersect.

¹³Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 6.

¹⁴Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 6.

¹⁵Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 6.

¹⁶Emily Pfeil, “The Black Museum Movement & Raising Black Consciousness,” CRG@CGP, March 23, 2016, <https://classracegender.wordpress.com/2016/03/23/the-black-museum-movement-raising-black-consciousness/>.

¹⁷Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 16.

¹⁸Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 22.

¹⁹Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 22.

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Figure 1: *Advertisement for the DuSable Museum of African American History, Chicago Daily Defender, August 26-September 1, 1967. Reproduced in From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement, 22.*

Created “for us, by us,” African American neighborhood museums pushed back against the white narrative that Black history, culture, and bodies provided no value and were a community weapon to combat this ideology by asserting the value and creating space for the African American experience.²⁰ However, as the desire for national recognition grew, the ethos of the neighborhood museum built on Black separatist power and pride came into conflict with the concept of integration into a white American history. As Blauner puts it, “To get one’s fair share of society’s benefits, it was necessary to participate. . . in the mainstream, which was, after all, the only game in town. On the other hand, if integration meant “becoming white,” compromising one’s ethnicity and deepest self, it seemed less and less worth the price.”²¹ The neighborhood museum movement initially offered a way to navigate this tension by resisting conformity to the white majority. By cultivating and celebrating Blackness and Black culture, many Americans could reject the pressure to integrate while still affirming pride in the distinctiveness of the Black experience. At the same time, museums allowed for cautious engagement with integration without fear that “[B]lack life would be lost in the American melting pot.”²² The museum movement pursued the seemingly incompatible goal of maintaining pride and autonomy while beginning integration on two fronts. While the Black Power movement often estranged white audiences, neighborhood museums advanced the objectives of civil rights and Black Power while also acting as intermediaries with white communities. This is because, to secure financial and political support, they tempered the more strident and separatist rhetoric of Black Power leaders, experimenting with strategies to involve the white majority with-

²⁰Meringolo, *Radical Roots*.

²¹Bob Blauner, *Black Lives, White Lives: Three Decades of Race Relations in America* (University of California Press, 2022), 16.

²²Blauner, *Black Lives, White Lives*, 17.

out compromising their commitment to Black institutional autonomy, self-sufficiency, and pride.²³ Importantly, this is not to say that the movement was corrupted, but instead that Black institutions, like the DuSable, were experimenting and learning how to connect and integrate with white America without losing the soul of their mission, “Black institutional capacity, self-sufficiency, and [B]lack pride.”²⁴ This careful negotiation became far more complex when the movement shifted from private neighborhood institutions to the fight for a national museum, where the stakes of visibility, narrative authority, and engagement with the white national mythology were significantly higher.

III. The Fight for a National Museum

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as neighborhood museums developed and instilled Black pride in their communities, the country, on a Federal level, began to debate how, and if, it should portray the history and culture of the African American experience. In 1965, fifty years after the National Memorial Association protested for a memorial building at the Civil War Grand Review, Representative James Scheuer (D-NY) proposed bill H.R. 10638, proposing to create an investigative “Commission on Negro History and Culture” to create a “national Negro museum.”²⁵ It was here that the decades of work by neighborhood museums laid the groundwork for valuable critiques leveled against this project. Dr. Charles Wright, the founder of the International Afro-American Museum, campaigned aggressively against this bill and even the establishment of a national museum at large.²⁶ He and many other prominent figures in the Black museum community argued that the government “would inevitably compromise the integrity of the stories that a national African American museum must tell.”²⁷ Moreover, Wright and others were suspicious of the motivations of a white congressman introducing a bill out of “a desire to do something” for African Americans.²⁸ Gathering together political support, they introduced another similar bill, intentionally killing the chances of either passing.²⁹

Dr Wright’s initial concerns that the government would inevitably corrupt the African American story were well-founded. The Smithsonian has a long history of creating exhibits meant to diversify the national narrative, but which instead have been demeaning, outright false, or exclusionary. A notable example of this is that in the late 1970s, the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum was accused of playing down African American accomplishments during World War II. Its response was to ask African Americans on its museum staff to allow for their faces to be used on mannequins in airplanes flown high over visiting crowds, thus supposedly increasing the “black presence.”³⁰ This was neither proper integration nor an accurate and fair representation of the Black experience and contributions to the war efforts, and it was performative exhibitions like these that characterized the ‘inclusion’ of African Americans into the American imagination. These failures, combined with the success of neighborhood museums, further fueled the desire for Black control over the portrayal of the African American experience, memory, and history.

In 1968, Congressman Clarence Brown Jr. (R-OH) proposed the creation of a national African American Museum located in Wilberforce, Ohio, due to its proximity to the Underground Railroad

²³Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 157.

²⁴Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 159.

²⁵Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 160.

²⁶Ochiai, “A ‘New Integration,’” 94.

²⁷Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 160.

²⁸Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 160.

²⁹Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 160.

³⁰Kate Taylor, “The Thorny Path to a National Black Museum,” *New York Times*, January 23, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/23/us/23smithsonian.html>.

and Wilberforce and Central State Universities, both HBCUs.³¹ While the museum did eventually open after a multitude of delays, the museum never received a single dollar of federal funding, and the calls for a proper national museum located in the heart of the nation were left unsatisfied due to both its location and lack of governmental support.³²

Over the next ten years, numerous proposals surfaced in Congress, and their lack of support can all be attributed to various concerns about curatorial control, museum funding, fears of theft of neighborhood museum support, and white worry of “ghettoiz[ing]” and further separation of Black history.³³ Progress stalled until Tom Mack, the president of Tourmobile Inc., a bus company that ran tours of the National Mall, began to campaign for “a clear and positive projection of African Americans. . . on the Mall.”³⁴ Mack, though well connected to the business and entertainment communities, knew nothing about the museum world or the essential role that Black neighborhood museums played in building Black consciousness and pride separate from white America.³⁵ That said, the politics these museums fostered, in the form of consciousness and Black Power, are clearly present in his politics, as he spent the next few years fighting to establish a museum on the National Mall independent of Smithsonian control. Mack believed in a Black integrationist approach to national visibility, so while the museum would be located on the National Mall, thus in a place of great national ideological significance, curatorial control, artistic vision, and even funding would still be held privately by African Americans, or NCEED, a Black intellectual foundation created and run by him.³⁶ Though this idea allowed for African Americans to retain control over their own narrative, there was strong pushback that it would relieve other Smithsonian institutions from their duty to include African Americans in their exhibitions and histories.³⁷ Another common criticism was that an independent museum would be a “self-serving identity politics” museum.³⁸ This, many white Americans feared, would continue to segregate African Americans from white American culture. Ironically, they were correct and just simply uncomfortable with the idea of a proud, distinct Black identity separate from the white national mythology. Regardless, the advisory committee took issue with Mack’s plan because securing private funding for an institution of this size would be challenging. Unstated by the committee in their report was the reality that the legacy of generations of slavery and segregation was the reason why the African American community had a profound lack of personal wealth and ability to fund an institution such as this.³⁹

Another widely held proposal came from John Kinard, the founding director of the Anacostia Museum and founding member of the African American Museum Association, or AAMA. Kinard, supported by those like Dr Wright, believed that a federal institution, even one not controlled by the white establishment, would always undercut the original mission of Black museums to highlight the distinct separation from white America and create pride in Blackness and Black power.⁴⁰ Thus, the only acceptable option would be making federal funds available to already existing Black neighborhood museums, thereby allowing African Americans to retain control, their community identities, and their distinct separatist Black historical and cultural canon to remain unblemished.⁴¹ One of the least popular opinions came from Roger Kennedy, the Director of the National Museum of

³¹Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 165.

³²Fath Davis Ruffins, “Culture Wars Won and Lost, Part II: The National African-American Museum Project,” *Radical History Review* 70 (1998): 80.

³³Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 168.

³⁴Ruffins, “Culture Wars Won and Lost, Part II,” 81.

³⁵Ruffins, “Culture Wars Won and Lost, Part II,” 81.

³⁶Ruffins, “Culture Wars Won and Lost, Part II,” 81.

³⁷Ruffins, “Culture Wars Won and Lost, Part II,” 82.

³⁸Ochiai, “A ‘New Integration,’” 94.

³⁹Ruffins, “Culture Wars Won and Lost, Part II,” 89-90.

⁴⁰Ochiai, “A ‘New Integration,’” 94.

⁴¹Ruffins, “Culture Wars Won and Lost, Part II,” 82.

American History (NMAH), who recommended that the African American experience be integrated into existing Smithsonian Institutions such as his own. Though this was meant to ease the concerns of continuing to “other” the Black experience, this view, held predominantly in the white-dominant curatorial space, was distinctively at odds with the project of Black separatism that neighborhood museums had been engaging with for the past few decades, and accordingly, Black museum leaders and activists strongly opposed this, leading to the rejection of Kennedy’s proposal.⁴²

Outside of the issues of control, location, and financing, the push for the creation of a National African American museum was materializing in years marked by vitriolic culture wars. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the idea of multiculturalism was under attack as it was described as “revisionist at best and potentially treasonous at worst.”⁴³ Unfortunately, Black power, pride, and consciousness all held undercurrents of separationist ideology, and the “for us, by us” mentality of creating a distinct canon of cultural and academic Blackness could not mesh with the integration that white America seemed to demand. Simultaneously, biracial, bipartisan coalitions arose on the outskirts of the push against multiculturalism, advocating for a place of “healing” and “racial reconciliation.”⁴⁴ Led in part by Congressman John Lewis, veteran Civil Rights activist, HR 3442, the National Museum of African American History and Culture Plan for Action Presidential Commission Act was passed, and a committee was formed to develop the museum.⁴⁵ Yet the committee was focused solely on the logistics of creating the museum; hence, none of the tensions of the past fifty years, and in fact the past eighty-six years, were resolved. Questions of curatorial control, building location, the type of national integration, and the overall mission remained unanswered and uncontested. While many pieces of the Black neighborhood museum movement could be absorbed into this nationalistic, integrationist project, many were fundamentally opposed to the core of what a Smithsonian National Museum seeks to do as an institution of the state. The decades-long struggle over control, representation, and integration set the stage for a new chapter, one in which the tensions between Black autonomy, national visibility, and the pressures of a state-run institution would have to be negotiated on the Nation’s most significant stage, the National Mall.

IV. Situating the National African American History and Culture Museum

The paradox confronting the NMAAHC can only be fully appreciated by first examining how national museums contribute to the construction, affirmation, and dissemination of national identity. The role of national museums is distinctive from other institutions as it is an integral part of the construction of our “imagined communities.”⁴⁶ The phrase “imagined community” refers to the fact that, even in the smallest nations, one cannot know every individual; accordingly, there must be an imagined identity that binds everyone together as one nation. There are many elements in the creation of national identity, such as flags, anthems, memorials, universities, and museums. However, museums hold a distinct place in the project of nation-building as they also serve to authenticate the boundaries of who is included in our national identities through the identification of certain groups as having their origins tied to those of the state.⁴⁷ This authentication serves a dual purpose by both defining the boundaries of the nation and integrating all groups within these

⁴²Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 168.

⁴³Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 168.

⁴⁴Ochiai, “A ‘New Integration,’” 95.

⁴⁵Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 169.

⁴⁶Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso Books, 1983), 15.

⁴⁷Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius, *National Museums and Nation Building in Europe 1750-2010* (Routledge, 2015), 146.

boundaries into the state's identity, mythology, and history.⁴⁸ Nowhere is this more true than in national museums located on the National Mall.

Pierre L'Enfant originally designed the National Mall, and it was later officially commissioned for construction by George Washington. The National Parks Service, the supervising agency of the Mall, states that it is the "ideal stage for national expressions of remembrance, observance, celebration, and expression of First Amendment rights."⁴⁹ Yet it is so much more than a stage; the Mall is the most potent link between our national mythology and values and individual citizens. Kirk Savage, a preeminent monument historian, states that "the monumental core in Washington functions somewhat like a pilgrimage site, where communities of believers come together in the act of occupying a holy site, seeing a relic, reenacting a sacred event."⁵⁰ The subtext of the National Mall and the museums and monuments that inhabit it are meant to paint a portrait, as Manfredo Tafuri, an architect and historian, says of, "a timeless, indisputable, completely 'positive' Olympus" which holds "great optimism and was thoroughly opposed to any polemical doubt." This ideological nationalist narrative espouses the values of freedom and equality at the base of our nation and the divine forward progress of a country. National museums, especially those on the National Mall, play a unique role in nation-building. They authenticate collective identity, enshrine shared values, and codify memory into an official history. This leaves NMAAHC to navigate the tension between fulfilling these integrative functions and asserting the specificity of African American history, a tension that constitutes the institution's core paradox.

V. The Paradox of NMAAHC

In 2006, nearly a century after the National Memorial Association first petitioned for a Civil War memorial, the commission established under H.R. 3442 formally recommended the creation of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Developed under Smithsonian institutional leadership, the museum was slated for construction on the final undeveloped parcel of the National Mall, situated between the Washington Monument and the National Museum of American History.⁵¹ Lonnie Bunch III, later appointed Secretary of the Smithsonian, was selected as the museum's inaugural director and assumed the role amid significant institutional limitations, including the absence of dedicated office space, minimal funding, and a staff of only one.⁵² Despite these challenges, Bunch, trained as a historian, recognized that the museum's most consequential task would be reconciling its historical lineage with the expectations of a national institution. To regard NMAAHC simply as an extension of the Black museum movement would be to obscure the complexities introduced by its location on the National Mall and its mandate to operate not solely as a Black museum, as many before have successfully done, but instead as a nationalistic project of "healing" and integration.⁵³ As Bunch remarked about the challenge, "Americans tend to like simple answers to complex questions. So the challenge is to use history to help the public feel comfortable with nuance and complexity." Bunch understood this challenge as central to what he termed a project of "new integration," and he translated this understanding into a curatorial vision structured around four pillars. First, all Americans should have the opportunity to learn about

⁴⁸Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius, *National Museums and Nation Building in Europe 1750-2010* (Routledge, 2015), 146.

⁴⁹"The Mall," National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/places/000/national-mall.htm>.

⁵⁰Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (University of California Press, 2011), 5.

⁵¹Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 169.

⁵²Tim Guenewald, "Progress versus Social Justice: Memory at the National Museum of African American History and Culture," *The Journal of American Culture* 44, no. 2 (2021): 116.

⁵³Ochiai, "A 'New Integration,'" 95.

African American history and culture. Secondly, the African American story is global and should be treated with its own agency. The third pillar pushes visitors to consider “what it means to be an American,” and more importantly, how the American story and American values are reflected and reinforced by the African American experience. Finally, the fourth invites African American museums around the nation to work together to promote this shared mission.⁵⁴ Using these pillars, Bunch sought to, in his own words, “help change America, help force America to confront the chasm between its stated ideals and the reality of life in America for the people who are oppressed and marginalized.”⁵⁵ Yet in positioning itself as a national project of confrontation and reconciliation, NMAAHC ultimately is forced to reproduce the very chasm it seeks to expose. While neighborhood museums authentically confronted the gap between American ideals and the lived African American experience, the national museum’s obligation to speak for, and to, the nation constrains its ability to challenge the dominant national mythology that the mall represents.

However, Bunch believed that breaking down this chasm was possible through his idea of “new integration.”⁵⁶ Unlike integration under the Civil Rights Act, which addressed desegregation and the requirement for equal treatment in society, Bunch’s new integration is a project of fundamentally reconstructing our national memory by using the African American experience as a lens to view the Nation’s history.⁵⁷ As Bunch himself says, “What is missing is a new synthesis—a “new integration”—that encourages visitors to see that exploring issues of race is essential to their understanding of American culture. Museums . . . have often failed to help visitors understand that African American culture is a wonderful lens to understand the American experience.”⁵⁸ In attempting to synthesize the African American experience with American history and national mythology, NMAAHC confronts a fundamental contradiction that these narratives cannot be fully, or even imperfectly, interwoven without distorting one or the other, as museum advocates have claimed for decades. As a national museum explicitly committed to a project of reconciliation, NMAAHC’s founding position often leads it, in the eyes of many observers, to privilege national mythology over historical truth.

This is not to say that NMAAHC fails as an extension of the Black museum movement, but instead that in taking the opposite approach to fixing “integration,” pride and inclusion in identity as an American instead of pride in separatism in Blackness, NMAAHC loses the opportunity to challenge the national mythology of American Exceptionalism and divine progress in a way that a Black neighborhood museum would not. Thus, as will be further discussed, NMAAHC is forced to find a way to integrate the historical wrongdoings done to African Americans into a national positive narrative, while an independent museum like DuSable can faithfully condemn the actions of the state.⁵⁹ Paradoxically, the NMAAHC’s very existence and the lessons it draws from the Black museum movement help to reframe the American narrative by centering histories often excluded from national memory. Still, as Bunch observes, it exists as “neither the domain of a dominant culture hesitantly diversified, nor a museum made for and by one community in particular.” This in-between status compels the museum to negotiate between challenging the nation’s myths and affirming its ideals—a tension that transforms individual perspectives but leaves the overarching narrative of American exceptionalism largely intact.⁶⁰

Undeniably, the Blacksonian holds a commanding physical presence on the central axis of the National Mall. Designed by Max Bond, Phil Freedlon, and David Adjaye, not only is the architectural

⁵⁴Ochiai, “A ‘New Integration,’” 96.

⁵⁵Ochiai, “A ‘New Integration,’” 96.

⁵⁶Ochiai, “A ‘New Integration,’” 97.

⁵⁷Ochiai, “A ‘New Integration,’” 97.

⁵⁸Faun Rice, “National Museum of African American History and Culture: A New Integration?,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 60, no. 2 (2017): 1.

⁵⁹Rice, “National Museum of African American History and Culture,” 2.

⁶⁰Rice, “National Museum of African American History and Culture,” 3.

design rich in curatorial references, but even simply its physical presence serves to contextualize the rest of the National Mall.⁶¹ Known as an example of “protest architecture,” the three-tiered corona shape, a reference to a West African headdress, is easily seen from all over the Mall. More importantly, the museums and monuments on the Mall are all viewable from inside the museum through its intricate metal latticework known as “Filigree,” inspired by Black metalsmiths in the South and traditional African basket weaving.⁶²⁶³ Even viewing from the exterior, NMAAHC frames the Mall by forcing visitors to view the other monuments and museums through its physical lens, i.e., the latticework of the African American experience (see figs. 2-4). The edges of the corona jut out to disrupt the view of the Washington Monument, breaking up its monolithic presence, and quite literally ‘brown’ visitors’ experience of the mall, invoking race at the heart of American history and mythology.⁶⁴ While, of course, breaking from the visual design language of the neoclassical white marble buildings around it, the architecture technically does follow classical Greco-Roman form with its use of base and shaft, thus literally both integrating itself into and diversifying the architectural design language.⁶⁵ In this way, NMAAHC’s design and location embody Bunch’s vision of “new integration” while also paying homage to a core principle of the Black museum tradition. Its architecture functions as more than a repository of artifacts. It stands as a physical monument and testament to the African American experience, echoing the physical role that neighborhood museums played within their communities. At the same time, it asserts the centrality of Black history within the national narrative, shaping the experience of all who encounter the museum, whether they enter its doors or simply pass by the Mall. As Bunch phrases it, “this building will sing for all of us.”⁶⁶



⁶¹Lance Hosey, “How the NMAAHC Carves Out a ‘Space of Resistance’ on the National Mall,” *ArchDaily*, January 4, 2017, <https://www.archdaily.com/802861/how-the-nmaahc-carves-out-a-space-of-resistance-on-the-national-mall>

⁶²Hosey, “How the NMAAHC Carves Out a ‘Space of Resistance.’”

⁶³NMAAHC, “Five Things to Know About Our Building Design,” Tumblr, September 6, 2016, <https://nmaahc.tumblr.com/post/150050236530/five-things-to-know-about-our-building-design>

⁶⁴Rice, “National Museum of African American History and Culture,” 2.

⁶⁵“The Building,” National Museum of African American History and Culture, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/about/building>

⁶⁶“The Building.”

Figure 2: Alan Karchmer. *View of latticework from the interior of the National Museum of American History and Culture.* Digital photograph. Courtesy of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.⁶⁷



Figure 3: Alan Karchmer. *Aerial view of the National Museum of American History and Culture on the National Mall.* Digital photograph. Courtesy of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

⁶⁷The view from the interior of the NMAAHC and the framing of the Mall, specifically the Washington Monument, through the outer metalwork of the building. Washington's achievements and memory, as well as the Mall's memory at large, take on new meaning through this contextualization, as it becomes harder to forget that Washington, despite his contributions to America, was a slaveholder.



Figure 4: Alan Karchmer. *The National Museum of American History and Culture and the Washington Monument*. Digital photograph. Courtesy of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

The task of curating NMAAHC's collection from the ground up offered Bunch an opportunity to shape a museum that could both enact his vision of "new integration" and extend the legacy of Black neighborhood museums onto a national stage. The "Save Our African American Treasures: A National Collections Initiative of Discovery and Preservation" program was a nationwide tour similar to the Antiques Roadshow.⁶⁸ Bunch and his curatorial team traveled throughout America, taking donations, teaching workshops, and building partnerships with everyone from major institutional donors to working-class Americans with an object to share.⁶⁹ This concept was drawn directly from Black neighborhood museums being constructed by the communities they are meant to serve, and in diversifying its collection to all Americans, NMAAHC became a museum built by the American people for the American people. To date, many visitors arrive at NMAAHC looking for artifacts that they have donated or to which they have a specific familial or community connection, thereby creating a uniquely personal visitor experience.⁷⁰

Their objects have become part of a national institution and one at the heart of the Nation's physical manifestation of its mythology, thus integrating them personally into the national narrative. For those unable to physically donate, NMAAHC created a digital "Memory Book" project where individuals could register and submit their family memories, lived experiences, or reflections on being African American.⁷¹ The stories were then compiled and sorted by subject matter and are readily accessible online to all. This project was so wildly successful that it even had to be briefly taken down to move to a larger software platform, and it is still in heavy use today.⁷² Through the "Memory Book" and "Save Our American Treasures" Projects, NMAAHC fulfills a central aim of the Black museum movement, giving African Americans the power to define their own histories and experiences, granting them both historical and curatorial authenticity and visibility. By embedding

⁶⁸Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 170.

⁶⁹Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 171.

⁷⁰Rice, "National Museum of African American History and Culture," 2.

⁷¹Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 171.

⁷²Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 171.

these personal stories, objects, and memories within a national museum at the symbolic center of the Nation's mythology, the museum transforms individual contributions into a collective American legacy, making participants not only part of the museum but part of the national story itself.

Yet while bringing personal stories and artifacts from African American citizens into a national institution builds a more authentic American narrative, NMAAHC's mandate is still to tell the American story, one that has been mythologized and made more palatable for the modern Americans. This chasm emerges from the tension between conveying an authentic African American experience and meeting the expectations of a dominant national mythology, a challenge that requires simultaneously pursuing nation-building through full integration and a unified American identity, while also honoring a Black cultural project rooted in separatism, community autonomy, and a distinct historical memory. The result is a structural constraint that shapes curatorial decisions, architectural design, and narrative framing, limiting the museum's ability to fully convey the lived realities of African American life.⁷³ As a result, while NMAAHC amplifies African American voices through initiatives such as the "Save Our African American Treasures" program and the digital "Memory Book," giving individuals a tangible presence in the museum and the national narrative, its foundational mandate for integration and use of "uplift suasion," a curatorial tool soon to be unpacked, ultimately prioritizes a mythologized vision of America over the full complexity and often harsh realities of African American life and history. A visitor's journey through NMAAHC begins in the historical galleries located stories underground, accessible only by an elevator that narratively acts as a time machine moving back to 1400.⁷⁴ Upon exiting, one follows a winding, dark, and deliberately claustrophobic hallway, through the early history of the Atlantic slave trade and the inhumanity of slavery in North America before the founding of America.⁷⁵ These exhibitions are filled with authentic, community-donated objects such as iron ankle shackles and collars, which, combined with the bombardment of data showing the magnitude of slavery, the visual depictions of brutal violence, and the dark, cramped physical space, rightfully leave visitors emotionally and even physically distressed.⁷⁶ Yet, looking more closely at specific parts of the exhibition, there is clearly a tilt in the didactics. The museum presents the Atlantic slave trade using statistics comparing Colonial North America to European nations, a statistical framing that distorts historical reality by artificially minimizing the central role of American slavery and misleadingly casting the trade as primarily a European problem.⁷⁷ Moreover, the museum barely addresses the expansion of chattel slavery in the United States after the American Revolution, reinforcing an obviously misleading historical framing. As Tim Gruenewald, a historian of American culture and museums, observes, the curatorial choice to omit this post-war slavery period emphasizes "the European nation state in contrast to the new, revolutionary US nation," implicitly suggesting that the support and perpetuation of slavery lies only in Europe, while progress toward abolition and liberation is uniquely an American achievement. This framing not only distorts the central role of the United States in perpetuating slavery but also aligns with a broader patriotic narrative that casts the nation as fundamentally progressive and morally redeemed.⁷⁸ This narrative is reinforced as visitors leave the cramped, gloomy, emotionally charged halls of the Historical Galleries (see figs. 5,6) and enter the "Paradox of Liberty" exhibit.

⁷³Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 177.

⁷⁴Gruenewald, "Progress versus Social Justice," 120.

⁷⁵Gruenewald, "Progress versus Social Justice," 121.

⁷⁶Gruenewald, "Progress versus Social Justice," 121.

⁷⁷Gruenewald, "Progress versus Social Justice," 121.

⁷⁸Gruenewald, "Progress versus Social Justice," 122.



Figure 5: Eric Long. *Image from the NMAAHC Slavery and Freedom Gallery*. Digital photograph. Courtesy of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.⁷⁹



Figure 6: Eric Long. *Point of Pines Cabin Display in the NMAAHC Slavery and Freedom Gallery*. Digital photograph. Courtesy of the National Museum of African American History and

⁷⁹The historical galleries are designed without windows, low ceilings, and a lack of open spaces. This is designed “to depress the mood of the visitors for their experience of the section on the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in North America before the founding of the United States.”

Culture.

Suddenly, the museum’s spatial script is flipped as visitors enter a light-filled, soaring exhibition hall (see fig. 7). In this cavernous space, an excerpt from the Declaration of Independence looms high above, “All Men Are Created Equal.”⁸⁰ This experience cannot be understated, as Wesley Morris, a New York Times reporter, writes, “You exit that long, tight, airless gallery into a huge open space with virtually no ceiling, and you realize you weren’t breathing. And then you catch your breath only to look up and see, on a platform, a statue of Thomas Jefferson.”⁸¹



Figure 7: Alan Karchmer. *The Paradox of Liberty Exhibit*. Digital photograph. Courtesy of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.⁸²

By combining Jefferson, the Declaration of Independence, and the vast expanses of liberated space, the museum constructs a monument to American national mythology. The implied message here is that the United States was not the primary perpetrator or perpetuator of slavery, and instead, at the end of that long history of suffering, a nation emerges as a guarantor of equality, falsely suggesting that the struggle for African American freedom and equality has always been central to America’s national identity.⁸³ Further, Jefferson is flanked by Black figures from his era who either actively opposed slavery or defied prevailing stereotypes of racial inferiority, creating the impression that they are ideologically equal to Jefferson and integral to the national mythology. In reality, these individuals deserve recognition as national heroes in their own right; instead, their

⁸⁰Gruenewald, “Progress versus Social Justice,” 122.

⁸¹Wesley Morris, “Visiting the African-American Museum: Waiting, Reading, Thinking, Connecting, Feeling,” *New York Times*, December 25, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/25/arts/design/smithsonian-museum-african-american-museum-history-culture-wesley-morris.html>.

⁸²The soaring hall, which describes the founding of America, gives visitors a palpable sense of physical relief from the claustrophobic, dark halls of the historical galleries. The implicit narrative is that within the founding of America can be found the solution to African American enslavement.

⁸³Gruenewald, “Progress versus Social Justice,” 123.

placement functions primarily to mitigate Jefferson's legacy, obscuring his role as a slaveholder and his complicity in sustaining the very system that denied freedom to those the nation purportedly existed to liberate.⁸⁴ The American Revolution was far from a solution to, or even an impetus towards, equality. Still, NMAAHC succumbs to the demands of being a national museum and upholding a national mythology. In doing so, it reveals again that a fundamental goal of the museum, unlike the Black neighborhood museum movement, is complete national integration. Its physical presence and design compromise the viewer's education towards a propagandist narrative of happy American integration on equal terms instead of attempting to reckon with the still unequal reality of the present through an analysis of mass incarceration, educational inequality, unequal policing, redlining, or unequal rates of employment.⁸⁵ Finally, instead of allowing visitors to fully understand the complex and often difficult present that is the current African American experience, Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey act as cheerful capstones to one's visit to an idealized, sanitized American experience.⁸⁶ As visitors exit the gallery, they are confronted with an image of President Obama's second inauguration with an endless crowd stretching towards the Washington Monument and beyond. Shockingly their exhibition displays give little actual information, despite both having fascinating life stories, however it is clear both Obama and Winfrey are there to act as visual celebrations and indications of the success of the national integration project through examples of Black achievement alongside the state.⁸⁷

While uplift-suasion serves to validate the national narrative and create soft-edged stories for easy integration, it does so at the cost of the full complexity of the African American experience, departing from a central goal of Black neighborhood museums: portraying African American life both within and distinct from white-dominated culture. This tension becomes especially evident in the museum's treatment of the contemporary African American experience, where much of the political, cultural, and separatist energy that shaped Black communities during the 1960s and 1970s has been smoothed over or erased.

The contemporary African American experience, grounded in decades of Black Power activism, embodies a complexity and assertiveness that the museum's galleries essentially erase or neutralize. Throughout the upper galleries, which highlight the contemporary African American experience, all traces of efforts to establish a distinct intellectual and cultural space outside of white dominated society have been deliberately erased, reflecting the museum's prioritization of national integration over the full complexity and autonomy of Black expression. To take just a few examples, many controversial parts of the Black Panther Party's history, notably those that were anathema to the white majority, have been excluded, as well as the featuring of uncontroversial Black figures such as Questlove and Mohammed Ali over more influential but divisive Black national heroes.⁸⁸ NMAAHC's portrayal conveys neither the true complexity of the African American experience by challenging national mythology nor the longstanding mission of neighborhood museums to assert an autonomous intellectual, historical, and cultural space beyond the control of white dominated institutions. Though Bunch says that he wants "to take on things that might be deemed controversial or difficult," the reality of the museum is one of politically sanctioned radicalism, which must fit neatly into both the national mythology and serve the project of further integration or be discarded.⁸⁹

⁸⁴Gruenewald, "Progress versus Social Justice," 124.

⁸⁵Gruenewald, "Progress versus Social Justice," 126.

⁸⁶Rice, "National Museum of African American History and Culture," 4.

⁸⁷Gruenewald, "Progress versus Social Justice," 126

⁸⁸Rice, "National Museum of African American History and Culture," 3.

⁸⁹Edward Rothstein, "National Museum of African American History and Culture Review: A Moving but Flawed Accounting of History," *Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 2016.

VI. Conclusion

Thus, NMAAHC's existence continues to be a paradox of "neither the domain of a dominant culture hesitantly diversified, nor a museum made for and by one community in particular."⁹⁰ It has attempted to accomplish the impossible task of combining a hundred-year movement of Black Power, pride, and separatism with a robust national mythology and narrative that has historically rejected the value, and even existence, of African American communities, history, and culture. Even in defining African American culture, the museum stumbles, but understandably so, as the contemporary African American experience is far too expansive to display in a single institution. The Sweet Home Cafe's menu of fried chicken and mac and cheese can be viewed as an attempt to include a white audience and a celebration of culture, or just as easily a poorly thought-out token of Blackness.⁹¹ Frankly, either view feels hard to swallow and inauthentic to the neighborhood museum cause. This contestation of memory, history, and national narrative is unsolvable and will continue to be debated in perpetuity as NMAAHC navigates its incompatible priorities on the nation's most visible stage.

In many ways, however, NMAAHC is a wild success. While visitors to other Smithsonian museums spend only around 45 minutes on average inside exhibits, the average "dwell time" of visitors to NMAAHC can be upwards of six hours, and in its first year, ticket lines to enter the museum began as early as 3:30 am.⁹² Just as they did at the DuSable Neighborhood Museum fifty years ago, visitors continue to pour in to learn, experience, and find their place in the American narrative. Moreover, even those who do not visit the museum have their experience of the National Mall, and thus national identity, contextualized by the 'protest architecture' embodied by NMAAHC's design.

In the end, NMAAHC demonstrates that visibility and national recognition, while essential, cannot guarantee historical truth when it flies in the face of national mythology and America's divine forward progress. As a national museum, NMAAHC must constantly balance the imperative to challenge dominant myths with the pressure to integrate African American history into a patriotic narrative, a tension that both softens its radical potential and frequently leads to failures on both sides. More importantly, NMAAHC's existence reminds us that museums are not neutral. They actively produce ideology, shaping what a nation remembers and how it remembers it. Symbolic inclusion can transform individual understanding and bind communities to a shared national story, but it cannot dismantle systemic inequality or fully reconcile the nation with its inexcusable past. Thus, NMAAHC stands as both a model and a warning. Even as marginalized histories are brought to the center of national memory, their power to disrupt, challenge, and provoke is constrained by the very same structures that grant them visibility. Moreover, these histories are often selectively mobilized, co-opted, or sanitized to serve political agendas on all sides, reminding us that memory itself can be weaponized for purposes far removed from justice or truth.

Unlike many other Smithsonian Museums, the narrative of NMAAHC will never be perfect or complete. Ending with hopeful, celebratory visuals of Obama's second inauguration and a short video about the current context of race in America, including leaders such as John Lewis, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Barack Obama, and more, take on greater meaning when contextualized against the view of a Trump White House through the bronze latticework ensconcing the building.⁹³ Ultimately, this museum may be the most challenging project the Smithsonian has ever undertaken. NMAAHC embodies the paradox of national recognition, demanding that African American histories be visible

⁹⁰Rice, "National Museum of African American History and Culture," 3.

⁹¹Maya Phillips, "The Smithsonian's Black-History Museum Will Always Be a Failure and a Success"

⁹²Parth Shah, "At African-American History Museum, Visitor 'Dwell Time' Is Off the Charts," NPR, November 3, 2016.

⁹³Gruenewald, "Progress versus Social Justice," 127.

at the heart of American memory while simultaneously exposing the limits, compromises, and ongoing tensions inherent in representing a community's truth. It is a monument to the African American experience, a memorial to the past, a negotiation with the Nation in the present, and a promise for the future.

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