

**African-American History *Is* American History:
Expanding the National Narrative in the Smithsonian
Institution**

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ABSTRACT

Deeply entrenched notions of American exceptionalism have long dominated the national narrative within the United States. This narrative, often presented by and reflective of white American men, has historically controlled many of the Smithsonian Institution's museums, confining exhibit content to patriotic and celebratory parameters. With the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, however, gaps in this predominant American narrative gained wider consideration, and the often-obscured histories of various cultural groups, including African Americans, began to gain prominence in the field of public history.

Museums have played a significant role in expanding the national narrative to be more inclusive of groups of different racial and cultural backgrounds. As a federally-funded public institution located in the nation's capital, however, many of the Smithsonian Institution's museums, including the National Museum of American History (NMAH), the National Museum of American Art (NMAA), the National Air and Space Museum (NASM), and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), have struggled for decades to define their role as educational institutions in contributing to a broader understanding of a culturally diverse America. The development of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), under the leadership of Lonnie G. Bunch III, serves as a turning point for the Smithsonian, as it reflects the knowledge gleaned from past controversies faced by other

Smithsonian museums. With an emphasis on curatorial authority and reliance on historical scholarship, the NMAAHC will help expand the American national narrative to be more inclusive, ultimately making clear that African-American history *is* American history.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1882, French theorist Ernest Renan asked the question “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” (“What is a nation?”). In the decades since, this critical question has engaged scholars including Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Anne-Marie Thiesse. At the same time, this question has become a constant, though often subtle and unremarked, source of conflict for museums and other public history sites as they attempt to define communal and collective histories. Anderson addresses Renan’s question by defining a nation as “an imagined political community”; it is imagined because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members... Yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” Drawing upon this historical construction of nationalism, scholars have begun to document the ease with which the experiences of many Americans have been excluded, erased, obscured, or forgotten within the history and development of the “imagined community.” Throughout much of U.S. history, the dominant national narrative has largely reflected the “imaginings” of white American men; however, since the rise and development of the Civil Rights Movement, a wider set of alternative national, transnational, and diasporic identities have emerged within public national consciousness, raising critical questions about public history and national identity.¹

¹ Ernest Renan, *Qu’Est-Ce Qu’Une Nation? Et Autres Écrits Politiques* (France: 1996); Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, 2006), 6; Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.); Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La Création Des Identités Nationales: Europe, XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

Entrenched notions of American exceptionalism and “manifest destiny” have defined the national narrative for centuries. Historian Anders Stephanson explains that the term “manifest destiny,” coined in 1845, captured and fueled contemporary ideology that American territorial expansion was taking place “in the name of liberty,” though this liberty was “said to be ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in spirit or race.” Even after American settlers populated the continent from coast to coast, the sense of “manifest destiny” and Anglo-Saxon American superiority did not disappear. Stephanson notes a prominent resurgence of these ideals during World War I, when President Woodrow Wilson “wanted to accentuate the providentially assigned role of the United States to lead the world to new and better things.” For Wilson, “what defined ‘America’ was precisely this special calling or mission.” This concept of American exceptionalism ultimately produced a fantastical narrative of U.S. history that has obscured and denied the violence of colonization, slavery, and imperialism therein. As a nation founded on the principles of freedom, equality, and liberty, perhaps the most enduring paradox is the nation’s history of slavery and racial discrimination. Therefore, this history has often been silenced and ignored in American public history, buried beneath celebratory renderings of American exceptionalism. Only with the development of the Civil Rights Movement did this history begin to receive public attention. Against this backdrop, scholars, public historians, and museum professionals alike began questioning and exploring the role of museums to challenge this narrative in the field of public history.²

² Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), xi-xii.

Since the mid-1780s, when Charles Willson Peale opened the first public museum of art and science in America, the role of museums has gradually changed and become a source of debate among public historians, museum professionals, politicians, and other stakeholders. Early museums like Peale's were simply considered "cabinets of curiosities," and their role was to display, protect, and preserve artifacts, offering little to no interpretation or narrative. More than two centuries since, museums today present exhibits that "draw on recent scholarship in art, literary criticism, and social history to offer broad interpretations about the origins, meaning, and value of objects, as well as theories about the thoughts and behavior of the people who made them and used them." While today's museums serve as educational institutions, the extent and scope of this role has been a source of contentious debate, most notably in the decades since the Civil Rights Movement. One position, commonly held by politicians, lobbyists, and wealthy stakeholders, is that museums should serve as an arm of government propaganda, presenting a patriotic and celebratory national narrative. Others in favor of governmental control have also called for a return to the "cabinets of curiosity" model, insisting that curators cannot present information objectively and therefore "should stick to curating objects," as they have "gone too far in exploring controversial matters." At the same time, many historians and museum professionals have argued that museums should serve as active educational institutions that need to be "more like forums than temples," allowing for dynamic discussion of contrasting viewpoints and interpretations of the nation's complex and diverse past. Consequently, curators and directors have

worked to achieve a balance between “commercialism and public enlightenment, [and] between education and celebration and unalloyed prejudice.” This divide has challenged curators to design exhibits that attract and entertain a broad audience, but also provide educational and enlightening content.³

This conflict has led to some uncertainty in the field of public history, as historians and museum professionals have struggled to define the scope of their duties as educators. Former Associate Director of Curatorial Affairs at the National Museum of American History (NMAH), James Gardner, questions the responsibilities of a public historian, asking: “whose vision of America should be interpreted” and what the role of historians and historical scholarship should be in shaping “the public’s understanding of the past.” Gardner recognizes the commonly held but antiquated opinion that history should be “essentially a recitation of fact, leaving the reader to draw their own analysis”; however, he argues that museums should do more than this, as museum professionals serve as public historians, and “have an obligation to interpret history” in order to “help our visitors understand that our history is diverse.” Activist Carole Zawatsky has echoed Gardner’s sentiments, arguing that as Americans, “we are a nation of immigrants” with no unified “American experience,” and with this background comes the responsibility of educators to foster “an awareness of our origins and of

³ Liane Hansen, “Philadelphia Museum Shaped Early American Culture,” *NPR*, July 13, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=92388477>; Amy Henderson and Adrienne L. Kaeppler, eds. *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 1; Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 122; for a deeper discussion of objectivity, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Robert C. Post, *Who Owns America's Past?: The Smithsonian and the Problem of History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), xvii.

the persistence of ethnicity and cultures.” This suggests that as educators, museum professionals and public historians have a duty to look beyond the “imagined community” of white American men, and present the public with a more inclusive, and thereby more complete, account of the American experience.⁴

As serving the public is one of the fundamental duties of a museum, public historians and museum professionals have also questioned whether or not public opinion and public memory can or should be included in the content of museum exhibits. While Edward Linenthal doubts the ability of museums to achieve a balance between scholarship and public memory, other historians, including Barbara Franco, Dolores Hayden, Susan Crane, and David Blight, believe that this balance is both achievable and essential. Franco argues that public historians must strive to provide a space “for both the voice of history and the voice of memory,” as the recognition of both memory and scholarship is critical for a more complete understanding of history. Additionally, historian Susan Crane believes it is the duty of museums and public historians to “share ideas about historical consciousness with similarly interested people [in the public], rather than ‘educate the public’ about history,” and thereby force a particular viewpoint on the visitors.⁵

⁴ Steven C. Dubin, *Displays of Power: Memory and Amnesia in the American Museum* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 10; James B. Gardner, "Contested Terrain: History, Museums, and the Public," *The Public Historian* 26, no. 4 (Fall, 2004), 12; Carole R. Zawatsky, "Cultural Reflections and Self-Reflection," *The Journal of Museum Education* 17, no. 2, (1992), 12.

⁵ Edward T. Linenthal, "Can Museums Achieve a Balance between Memory and History?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, no. 41 (1995); Barbara Franco, "The Communication Conundrum: What is the Message? Who is Listening?" *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (Jun., 1994), 152; Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); Susan A. Crane, "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum," *History*

Historian David Blight argues that it is particularly important to consider public memory in conjunction with scholarship when approaching the interpretation of race and racism in American history. Blight writes: “Memory is one of the most powerful elements in our human constitution”; therefore, both academic history and public memory should be considered in order to present a valuable interpretation for the broader public. While historians are seen to be “custodians of the past [and] preservers and discoverers of the facts,” public memory requires “a sense of both humility and engagement [as] memory is often created as a sacred set of absolute meanings and stories, possessed as the heritage or identity of a community.” In short, Blight states: “Memory is owned; history is interpreted,” and thus both offer different aspects that are critical to achieving an understanding of and connection to the past. Ultimately, Gardner argues that museum curators must embrace multiple perspectives on history, and should not simply “present the past as we wish it had been.” This requires curators to push past the deeply entrenched narrative of American exceptionalism towards a more complex and complete narrative. As scholars have debated the relationships and duties of public historians and museums, many have done so on the terrain of the National Mall.⁶

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and Theory 36, no. 4, Theme Issue 36: Producing the Past: Making Histories Inside and Outside the Academy (Dec., 1997), 62.

⁶ David W. Blight, "If You Don't Tell it Like it was, it can Never be as it Ought to be," in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, eds. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (New York: New Press, 2006), 20, 23-24; Gardner, op. cit., 17.

In this thesis, I use the Smithsonian Institution as a lens to examine the role of museums and museum curators in defining the national narrative within the United States. The Smithsonian Institution serves as a unique lens to explore this issue, as it is a government-funded institution located in the nation's capital. This position presents the risk of visitors making the mistaken assumption that the information presented within the Smithsonian Institution is the official, government-sanctioned, version of American history. This situation has shaped numerous debates over the years surrounding the role of the Smithsonian as an educational institution. These debates have led many museum professionals, both within the Smithsonian Institution and more broadly, to consider the role of race in the national narrative by examining which groups are represented in their museums and how. Over the years, debates regarding the representation of race, multiculturalism, and American exceptionalism have revolved around the exhibit content in the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History (NMAH), as well as the National Museum of American Art (NMAA), the National Air and Space Museum (NASM), the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), and the future National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC).⁷

While the American Alliance of Museums charges museum curators with the duty of creating exhibits based exclusively on research conducted according to scholarly standards, external political and economic pressures have often made this standard difficult to achieve, especially within the federally funded museums

⁷ Dubin, *op. cit.*, 222.

of the Smithsonian Institution. Historians Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer highlight the burden on curators and public historians: “Historians have professional credentials they can mobilize to make their claims to speak for the past... But other social actors have wielded considerable financial and political authority that has long jeopardized the integrity of public history.” As the Smithsonian Institute and its curators rely on government funding, their message must be “approved” to a certain extent. NMAH curator emeritus Robert C. Post notes that recent discussion in Smithsonian councils have even revolved around “whether the curators’ understanding was to be accorded due respect if it departed from ‘commonly accepted viewpoints,’ commonly accepted by the most influential stakeholders, that is.” These stakeholders have often used their influence to pressure the Smithsonian and its curators to ensure that a narrative of American exceptionalism is reflected throughout their exhibits. As a response to these pressures, however, many historians, including Alex Roland and Patrick Roberts, have emphasized the fundamental duty of public historians and curators to educate the public, arguing that curators must find a way to present both the successes and triumphs of a nation, as well as the embarrassments and failures within national histories.⁸

This paper relies upon the work of prominent historians, the insights of former and current Smithsonian employees, and documents from the Smithsonian

⁸ “Standards Regarding Education and Interpretation,” *American Alliance of Museums*, <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/education-and-interpretation>; Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer, *Contested Histories in Public Space: Memory, Race, and Nation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 9; Post, *op. cit.*, 281; Alex Roland, "Voices in the Museum," *Technology and Culture* 39, no. 3 (Jul., 1998); Patrick Roberts, "Am I the Public I Think I Am? Understanding the Public Curriculum of Museums as "Complicated Conversation," *The Journal of Museum Education* 31, no. 2, Expanding Conversations: How Curriculum Theory Can Inform Museum Education Practice (Summer, 2006).

Institution's archives, to examine the ways in which Smithsonian directors and curators have worked to define and redefine the national narrative over time. I will do this by first considering the Smithsonian Institution's history and the numerous historical controversies surrounding the NMAH, the NASM, the NMAA, and the NMAI. I will then examine the development of the NMAAHC and the role of Director Lonnie G. Bunch III in expanding the national narrative to include a more complex and diverse set of historical actors and developments.

In Part I of this thesis, I explore the chronological development of several Smithsonian exhibit controversies and examine how these conflicts influenced the degree of curatorial authority, reliance on historical scholarship, and the capacity of the museum to serve as an educational institution. Additionally, I explore how the changing times affected the conception of American exceptionalism and how representative the national narrative was that was put forth by the various museums throughout the Smithsonian. In Part II of this thesis, I utilize the reflections of NMAAHC Director Lonnie Bunch, in conjunction with various news outlets and reports on the progress of the developing NMAAHC, to argue that Bunch has shaped the museum based in large part on influence drawn from these past Smithsonian struggles. Having experienced first-hand the consequences of many contentious decisions in the Smithsonian's past, Bunch has emphasized curatorial authority and reliance on historical scholarship in order to develop a successful museum that will expand the national narrative to include African American history.

PART I: Learning from the past

Defining the National Narrative: The Development of the NMAH

As a government-funded public institution in our nation's capital, the Smithsonian has often been held to different standards than other museums, with many of its exhibits subjected to strict scrutiny. During the 1994 hearings of the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, Democratic whip Wendell Ford of Kentucky cautioned that "the Smithsonian must understand that, as an institution supported with Federal funds, it is ultimately accountable to the American public, whose lives and history its exhibits reflect," or at least, whose lives and history the exhibits *ought* to reflect. However, the degree to which Smithsonian exhibits have truly reflected a diverse constituency has varied over time, begging the question of who was considered part of this "American public." The inclusiveness of exhibit content not only changed as it reflected the changing times historically, but also as the Smithsonian curators struggled with powerful outside parties for ultimate control over their exhibit content. As an institution reliant on public opinion, private donors, and government funding to keep its doors open to the public, curatorial prerogative has often been forced to take a backseat.⁹

Though established in 1846, it was not until the 1960s that the Smithsonian included a museum dedicated exclusively to the history of the United States. Preceded by the opening of a national zoo, the National Museum of Natural History, the American Art Museum, and the National Air and Space

⁹ Post, *op. cit.*, 269.

Museum, an American History museum finally joined the Smithsonian's ranks in 1964 as The Museum of History and Technology (MHT). From the outset, however, the MHT struggled to define its mission and role in society. After considering names including the Museum of Man and His Works, the Museum of American Civilization, and the Museum of American History, the Smithsonian committee finally settled on the Museum of History and Technology as a place to showcase "American ingenuity." Many of its inaugural exhibits, including *Everyday Life in the American Past* and *The Growth of the United States*, were designed to appeal to a broad audience. As the collection expanded, the museum also featured well-known cultural icons like Dorothy's Ruby Slippers from *The Wizard of Oz* and Kermit the Frog from *Sesame Street*. Historians Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer praise the MHT for seeming to recognize early on that its greatest constituency was "the common folk." Walkowitz and Knauer argue that the Smithsonian worked to serve this group by "producing histories that highlighted [their] voices and experiences – women, workers, and racial 'minorities' – in history." While this was a noble effort at the outset, soon many sponsors, politicians and "state actors," who were "heavily invested in the 'histories' that [were] being destabilized if not discredited," began to push back and exert their influence to include more celebratory and triumphal exhibits.¹⁰

The influence of politicians and various stakeholders is evident even in the founding documents of the MHT. In 1956, President Eisenhower signed Public

¹⁰ "General History," Smithsonian Institution, *Smithsonian Institution Archives*, <http://siarchives.si.edu/history/general-history>; Post, *op. cit.*, 36; "Growth and Development," National Museum of American History, *Smithsonian Institute Archives*, <http://siarchives.si.edu/history/national-museum-american-history> Walkowitz and Knauer, *op. cit.*, 3-4.

Law 573, granting \$33.7 million for the construction of the MHT, imagining it to be a place where one “could bask in the glory of a national showcase for American ingenuity.” Post argues that at the time, “Always in the background was an image of the museum as a weapon in the cultural Cold War,” and figures like the Smithsonian’s Secretary, Leonard Carmichael, “linked the storied past of the Institution with the story of progress.” It is clear, therefore, that the museum has stood as a bastion for patriotism and American exceptionalism since its inception, as it was seen as a symbol that “could dramatically reflect the power and authority of a great nation.” As the museum became more well established, government officials and powerful politicians began to regulate and control the content of the museum, using it as a platform to illuminate the influence and power of a heroic America in the twentieth-century world.¹¹

The impact of this political control is reflected in the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations. In 1971, the director of the MHT received a request from the director of President Nixon’s Office of Management and Budget, demanding a major celebratory exhibit on “productivity” be developed and opened within a matter of months. The project was fully funded by the government. While funding from Congress had been notably “stingy” in earlier years, “money began to flow” in the early 1970s “for exhibits to accompany celebrations marking two hundred years of American independence.” With Congress directing the context and message of the exhibits, the budget for the museum doubled between 1969 and 1974. Approximately two dozen patriotic exhibits were designed for the MHT,

¹¹ Post, *op. cit.*, 36-37.

three notable ones being, *We the People*, *A Nation of Nations*, and *1876*. The Smithsonian desperately needed money, so it became something akin to an arm of government propaganda.¹²

In addition to government influence, exhibit content also reflected the power of funding from private donors. While historians have noted the influence of donors in the early years of the museum as being largely harmless or “laughably clumsy,” the influence is there nonetheless. One prime example of this would be the “mildly embarrassing” 1973 exhibit *Shaving Through the Ages*, funded by the Gillette Safety Razor Company. The main purpose of this exhibit was to feature Gillette’s newly developed “twin-blade Gillette Trac II” razor. While there were no outstanding repercussions of this exhibit, this blatant advertising set a precedent of the museum ceding control to the desires of donors, thereby blurring the overall purpose of the museum early on. While the Smithsonian has since mostly avoided such overt pressures from outsiders seeking to advertise their product, this type of funding concession can still be seen in the current NMAH exhibit *America on the Move*, funded by General Motors. A \$10 million donation from General Motors secured the exhibit the subtitle of *The General Motors Hall of Transportation*, along with a “very large sign... designating nearly all of the east end of the first floor as General Motors territory.” While General Motors denies having any hand in determining exhibit content, certain members of the NMAH branch of the Congress of Scholars have “decried the ‘commercial branding of public space,’” and questioned the hand of

¹² *Ibid.*, 104-106.

General Motors in the lack of discussion of “environmental issues, dependence on foreign oil,” etc. in *America on the Move*. Whether or not General Motors influenced exhibit content cannot be said for certain.¹³

As the MHT was finding its footing in the 1960s and 70s, it was already struggling for control of exhibit content, powerless to fight the whims of the government that controlled seventy percent of the Smithsonian’s annual budget. While ample funding was provided during the 60s and early 70s, the late 70s into the 80s were a time of transition for the Smithsonian as federal funds began to rapidly dry up, inspiring curators to try to take back control of exhibit content in the MHT. As curators began to look for a new direction and focus for the museum, they harkened back to their inaugural exhibits, once again emphasizing items of mass culture or “vernacular culture.” Historian Michael Kammen describes this time as transformational for the Smithsonian’s MHT, as “innovative curators” recognized that “*mass* culture had long since begun to play a significant role in American history and therefore should also be represented in the collections and display cases at their museum.” By presenting objects that average Americans could recognize, the MHT strove to appeal to a broad audience.¹⁴

This new effort played out in 1978, when the museum announced that it would place the easy chairs from the popular television sitcom *All in the Family* on permanent display. This decision turned out to be quite contentious, as it caused both museum professionals and members of the public to question the role of the museum. The MHT received many complaints about their acquisition of the

¹³ *Ibid.*, 109 and 259.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xvi.

chairs, some from people who simply did not like the television show, but many from others who held “more traditional views of what belongs in a museum purporting to be a serious cultural institution.” Proponents of this viewpoint “felt scandalized that furniture from a TV sitcom could possibly receive consideration for inclusion.” One critic in particular chastised the MHT, writing: “No wonder you are always having to ask Congress for money... if the Smithsonian is going to be cluttered up with junk like this.” As the MHT continued to receive an influx of complaints, the issue soon grabbed the attention of the media, turning the Bunker chairs into a matter of national debate.¹⁵

While the Smithsonian received an influx of letters about this issue, the principal curator, Ellen Hughes, noted that the letters “rarely came from people who visited the *All in the Family* exhibit in person, only from those responding to media coverage.” In fact, this issue reappears throughout Smithsonian history – many vocal critics never visited the contentious exhibit in person; nevertheless, they contributed to popular debate and fanned the flames of the critical media. As it turned out, the Bunker chairs were the most popular items in the museum and one of the first things visitors went to see. It was at this time that the museum also began displaying artifacts including Dorothy’s ruby slippers from the *Wizard of Oz*, a studio set from *M*A*S*H**, and the jacket worn by Fonzie from the sitcom *Happy Days*. While mass culture icons became a staple in the museum’s exhibits, the museum was criticized by some for displaying this “clutter,” but criticized by others when the museum did not display certain pieces of mass culture that

¹⁵ Michael G. Kammen, *Visual Shock: A History of Art Controversies in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 270-271.

visitors had come to expect. As Kammen notes, the museum “went from damned if you do to damned if you don’t.” With its role still in flux, it was difficult for the museum to meet the varied expectations of its constituents.¹⁶

As the MHT continued to create exhibits that appealed to the “common man,” this comfortable and steady exhibit trend was upended when Ronald Regan assumed the Presidency in 1981. Post reflects, “With Ronald Regan in the White House and retrenchment the watchword, there was a tacit understanding that Smithsonian appropriations were to be limited to salaries and upkeep. Money for exhibits would have to come from the private sector.” While the Smithsonian was forced to look elsewhere for exhibit funding, a “new generation of curators” was also entering the museum, and they began to “revamp” the museum’s agenda. Historian Mike Wallace notes a marked change during this period, as museums “shifted from enshrining objects toward using them to explain social relations.” Although the Smithsonian was not immune to controversy before this time, the Institution had stayed largely out of the public eye and gained the “sleepy nickname” of the Nation’s Attic. This began to change in the 1980s, however, as exhibits began to shift away from the quieter style of object-based exhibits, and the museum got renamed as the National Museum of American History, “to better represent its basic mission—the collection, care and study of objects that reflect the experience of the American people.” With the focus of the museum no longer

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 270-271.

tied specifically to history and technology, exhibits were freed up to address an even broader scope of historical and contemporary topics.¹⁷

This transition was largely aided by the arrival of the new Smithsonian Secretary, Robert Adams, in 1984. Adams has been described as being “very much an academic,” and his priority in becoming Secretary was research. Adams “aimed to put the institution on the cutting edge of scholarship, or at least to modernize exhibits and programs where the institution had fallen behind.” Adams attempted to use scholarship to illuminate pressing social issues including gender and race; this was a dramatic shift from the quiet “Nation’s Attic” that people had come to expect, and thus received much criticism and pushback. While Adams, aided by NMAH Director Roger Kennedy, strove to develop exhibits that “were about much more than ‘displaying x number of objects,’” many of these planned exhibits did not ever develop, as they did not receive the private funding that was largely depended upon during the 1980s.¹⁸

Throughout the Smithsonian’s history, this overwhelming reliance on public funding has shaped the nature of exhibit content within the Institution’s many museums. While the Smithsonian has faced struggles with donors seeking to influence exhibit content, they also have had to contend with the obvious fact that “controversial exhibits are less likely to find sponsors to fund them.” Wallace explains that “Sponsors usually represent established power; they tend to balk at presentations that contest the way things are. They also dislike being associated

¹⁷ Post, *op. cit.*, xvii and 225; Wallace, *op. cit.*, 116; “Mission and History,” National Museum of American History, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/museum/mission-history>

¹⁸ Richard H. Kohn, "History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institution's Enola Gay Exhibition," *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (Dec., 1995), 1039; Post, *op. cit.*, 190.

with any controversy, whatever its content.” Such an aversion to controversy has dramatically shaped exhibit content over the years, and continues to influence exhibit content today. The desire to avoid controversy has engendered a history of “playing it safe” and shying away from more difficult topics, especially including the public history of race and gender, as well as subjects such as abortion and gay rights.¹⁹

An Age of Controversies: Reconsidering American Exceptionalism During the Culture Wars

“Americans are sick and tired of being told by some cultural elite that they ought to be ashamed of their country” - Newt Gingrich

While the lack of funding in the 1980s prevented the development of some potentially influential exhibits, Adams would still head one of the most controversial time periods in Smithsonian history as he pushed back against the notion of “playing it safe.” Adams ushered in an age of continual controversies beginning with the 1986 NMAH exhibit *A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and World War II*. With Adams support, NMAH Director Roger Kennedy and Curator Tom Crouch took advantage of government funding for an exhibit coinciding with the Bicentennial celebration of the U.S. Constitution. While it was expected that the Constitution would be praised and commemorated, Kennedy and Crouch designed *A More Perfect Union* to “[address] a grave constitutional *failure*, the imprisonment of 120,000 Japanese-Americans during World War II...” Post argues that never before had a Smithsonian exhibit “ever

¹⁹ Wallace, *op. cit.*, 122-123

been framed in terms so likely to stir up controversy.” While the exhibit was critiqued as being “sad and disturbing,” the NMAH escaped relatively unscathed, as Kennedy managed to “persuade critics that their ire was misplaced,” and placed emphasis on the reminder that the nation “could only strive toward ‘a more perfect union.’” This proved to be a pivotal exhibit, however, as it sparked a new wave throughout the Smithsonian Institution among administrators and curators, who began “pondering opportunities that might be posed for other such reminders, or at least for enabling voices to be heard that had not been heard before.” As this mentality began to work its way into more exhibits, it collided head-on with the emerging conservative ideals of the “culture wars” of the 1990s, bringing the Smithsonian into the spotlight as one exhibit after another was subjected to strict scrutiny and public criticism.²⁰

The culture wars encompass a time that often found vocal conservative politicians including Newt Gingrich, Robert Dole, and Pat Buchanan, pitted against the liberal academic elite. These conservative politicians echoed in part the controversial ideas introduced by philosopher and academician Allan Bloom in his 1987 bestselling book *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. Bloom was one of the earliest vocal critics of institutions of higher education for undermining the “proper” way to view society, and his book has been charged with being “the first salvo of the culture wars.” Many conservatives,

²⁰ Post, *op. cit.*, 193-194; James B. Gardner, explains in that the “history wars” or “culture wars” were “the debates over National History Standards and the interpretation of the *Enola Gay* at the National Air and Space Museum [that] were part of a larger debate over history that encompassed the infamous *West As America* exhibit, the Columbus quincentennial, and other hot-button issues a decade ago.” Quoted from Gardner, *op. cit.*, 16.

including Rush Limbaugh, latched on to Bloom's criticisms and used them to further their own agenda. In his 1993 book, *See, I Told You So*, Limbaugh echoes Bloom's critiques, noting: "We have lost control of our major cultural institutions. Liberalism long ago captured the arts, the press, the entertainment industry, the universities, the schools, the libraries, the foundations, etc." What Limbaugh captured in his book was the acute awareness he shared with fellow conservatives that the cultural climate in the 1990s, in the wake of the Cold War, found many Americans, historians and non-historians alike, contemplating the wars that had ravaged the nation and the rest of the world for the past decades.²¹

It was within this political and cultural climate that many Americans found themselves ultimately wondering "if America was a righteous and innocent nation." As historians began to openly question the fundamental principles of American exceptionalism, discussions on this matter made their way into schools, museums, and the public consciousness. This spurred right-wing conservatives like Buchanan to take up arms against what they saw as a Leftist conspiracy and a "sleepless campaign to inculcate in American youth a revulsion toward America's past." Much of the blame was placed on historians from the 1960s, who were painted as an "angry group of anti-American radicals" who "bullied their way into power positions in academia," and immediately set out to "demolish traditional history." As the "traditional history" valued by right-wing conservatives celebrated American exceptionalism and the accomplishments of prominent white

²¹ Allan D. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Michael S. Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 143; Mike Wallace, "Culture War, History Front," *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, eds. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 174.

men, Limbaugh accused historians of “a primitive type of historical revisionism” that “promoted victimization theories, exalted women and people of color over white males, and pushed a divisive multiculturalism.” Professor of American and African American Studies, Hazel Carby, explored the divisive nature of “multiculturalism,” by defining it as a “code [word] for *race*.” Carby noted that multiculturalism was particularly divisive and controversial, especially in the national educational system, for the concept was the source of many debates about “contemporary meanings of race in North America.” As consideration of multiculturalism became more prominent, it featured in many debates during the culture wars.²²

One of the most contentious issues outside of the Smithsonian at this time revolved around the new National Standards for U.S. History that were presented in 1994. Though the National Standards were developed by over 6,000 consultants including teachers, parents, and scholars – in addition to the involvement of thirty-five advisory organizations, including the Organization of American Historians, the Organization of History Teachers, the American Historical Association, and the National Education Association – the Standards were vehemently attacked by conservatives. Former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Lynne Cheney, publicly criticized the new standards for underrepresenting “traditional heroes” like Ulysses S. Grant, in

²² Edward T. Linenthal, “Anatomy of a Controversy,” in *History Wars*, *op. cit.*, 59 and 61; Wallace, “Culture War, History Front,” *op. cit.*, 175; Hazel V. Carby, “The Multicultural Wars,” *Radical History Review* 54, (1992), 9.

favor of mentioning women and minorities “too often,” in spite of the fact that the vast majority of the subject matter was still dedicated to white males.²³

The new standards were also attacked for inviting “debate not celebration” of American history. Historian Mike Wallace argues that ultimately, the objections to the National Standards were against “the pragmatic shift the history standards represented.” Wallace notes that previous standards reflected “a simple saga of remarkable men doing remarkable deeds,” whereas the new standards examined the experiences of ordinary people and topics like slavery, “not to muckrake or denigrate the American past but to understand it.” While this may have been the intent, the fervor of the debates and considerable opposition from right-wing conservatives, led Gingrich to call for the elimination of the National Endowment for the Humanities altogether, as he perceived it to be responsible for the new history standards that were “destructive for American Civilization.” Although academics may have received the brunt of the criticism during the culture wars, public historians and the Smithsonian Institution were also dragged into the conflicts and subjected to heightened public scrutiny and governmental attacks. Buchanan specifically accused the Smithsonian of taking part in a conspiracy to poison visitors with anti-Americanism by “consciously and intentionally [violating] principles of instilling greatness.” Ultimately, the volatile climate of the culture wars, combined with Adams’ provocative direction, made the Smithsonian susceptible to severe criticism, igniting a storm of controversies in the 1990s.²⁴

²³ Wallace, “Culture War, History Front,” *op. cit.*, 182.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 183-184.

Some of the most controversial exhibits during this time included the 1991 NMAA's exhibit *The West as America: Re-Interpreting Images of the Frontier 1820-1920*, the NMAH's 1994 exhibit *Science in American Life* and most famously, the NASM's exhibit on the Enola Gay, *The Last Act*. When *The West as America* opened to the public in 1991, it provided fuel to the fire of the developing culture wars, as it offered "a sharply revisionist look at nineteenth-century landscapes, battles, genre scenes, photographs, and paintings of Native Americans in relation to westward expansion and its justifying rationale, Manifest Destiny." While this exhibit was the result of extensive research done by the curatorial team, it was inflammatory as it "called interpretive attention to imperialism, racism, and genocide as engines of consequences of aggressive national growth," which was, from a Leftist perspective, "valid and refreshing," but to others, it was offensive as it "posed fundamental challenges to traditional, rarely questioned views of historically based nationalism." Many viewers, including the conservative Librarian of Congress and former NMAH Director, Daniel Boorstin, harshly criticized this exhibit for presenting a "perverse" and "revisionist" American history. One of the most common attacks hurled at the Smithsonian during the culture wars was the accusation that they were promoting "historical revisionism." As the curators began to reconsider, change, and "revise" the message in their museums, they transformed the Smithsonian Institution from the Nation's Attic, into a more provocative institution; however, this change was ill-received by many, including Boorstin. In response to *The West As America*, Boorstin took it upon himself to alert the Republican Senator Ted Stevens of the

“perversity” of the exhibit, so Stevens used his political muscle and “condemned the exhibition without having seen it and threatened to slash the Smithsonian’s budget even though the \$500,000 cost of the show had come from endowed and private funds rather than federal appropriations.” This budget cut did not occur, but the threat alone had a direct impact on the exhibition as curators quickly changed wall texts and a national tour of the exhibit was cancelled. Additionally, the staff was demoralized and a precedent for government intimidation was put in place. Republican Texas congressman Sam Johnson was even appointed to the Smithsonian Board of Regents “to keep historical revisionism under control.”²⁵

Historian Eric Foner notes that for many “outside the academy” – meaning non-historians – “the act of reinterpretation is often viewed with suspicion, and ‘revisionist’ is invoked as a term of abuse.” Accepting that reexamining and revising history was not only an integral part of what historians do for a living, Dubin notes that revisionism was a fairly widespread phenomenon at this time. He recognizes that “history and revisionism are central motifs of the 1990s, on both personal and social levels. Americans have become obsessed with reexamining who they are, where they’ve come from, and what they’ve done.” This reexamination coupled with the concept of revisionism was particularly inflammatory, and Post accuses men like Sam Johnson and Newt Gingrich for promoting the “perception of revisionism as the distortion or denial of the one *correct* story.” Post’s criticism highlights the concept that there is no such thing as a single correct history, but rather revisionism stands as a way to present a more

²⁵ Kammen, *op. cit.*, 282-283; Post, *op. cit.*, 218; Linenthal, “Anatomy of a Controversy,” *op. cit.*, 59 and 62.

complete understanding of any given event through the acknowledgement of multiple perspectives and interpretations.²⁶

While the Smithsonian was being criticized for “revising” history, they were also under fire for “embracing ‘the worst elements of America’s academic culture.’” For this, the Smithsonian Institute was publicly shamed, and Representative Newt Gingrich, speaking out against the Smithsonian, declared: “Americans are sick and tired of being told by some cultural elite that they ought to be ashamed of their country.” While this comment was a reaction to the *West as America*, Gingrich was also responding to the content of numerous other provocative exhibits at the NMAH. In addition to the exhibit *A More Perfect Union*, other controversial exhibits included *From Field to Factory*, *Science in American Life*, and *American Encounters*. These exhibits bravely approached more difficult and potentially controversial aspects of American history. *From Field to Factory* was particularly notable as it “addressed the migration of African Americans from the south to northern industrial cities during the interwar years,” and put visitors in the position of having to choose to enter the exhibit through a door either labeled “Colored” or “White.” In 1994, *Science in American Life* also received much criticism, for in addition to exploring “discovery on the frontiers of knowledge,” it also looked at less glamorous topics including the use and harmfulness of DDT and PCBs, as well as the consequences of the *Challenger* explosion, and to a certain extent the fallout from the atomic bombing of Japan. *American Encounters* was another impactful exhibit, as it “presented a complex

²⁶ Eric Foner, “History’s Public Function,” in Kirkendall, *op. cit.*, 348; Dubin, *op. cit.*, 4; Post, *op. cit.*, 267.

story of conflict and compromise between Native Americans, Africans, Asians, and Europeans, showing how these interactions changed each of the participants and constituted the region's identity." These exhibits all mark social progress in the museum, by way of being more inclusive of people of a diversity of backgrounds, but it was a progress that many Americans were not ready to acknowledge or accept.²⁷

During the 1994 hearings of the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, Representative Sam Johnson argued that it was "the national museum's fundamental duty to teach 'what is good about America.'" This belief essentially reduces the role of the museum to being an arm of propaganda for the government, rather than an educational institution. The Republican committee chairman Ted Stevens agreed that taxpayers should not "be expected to support work on exhibits that contradicted 'commonly accepted viewpoints' about what really happened." While Post refers to this committee as a "Republican Revolution," even the Californian Democrat Dianne Feinstein, once a history major herself, questioned if it was really "the role of the Smithsonian to 'interpret history.'" The committee agreed that history should be "essentially a recitation of fact, leaving the reader to draw their own analysis," which would allow the Smithsonian "to reflect real America rather than something that a historian dreamed up." By simply reciting facts, this would allow the museum to avoid any of the moral ambiguities and uncertainties that are inherently part of defining a national self-image. The culture wars, coupled with several provocative exhibits

²⁷ Post, *op. cit.*, xiv, 182, and 214; Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History, op. cit.*, 117.

in the Smithsonian, put the role of both academic and public historians in danger as they were subjected to strict scrutiny, causing vicious debate among politicians, the general public, and the media.²⁸

Ultimately, no exhibit was more controversial or inflammatory than the NASM's exhibit *The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II*. Dubin makes the argument that the culture wars provided the base for the inflammatory nature of the *Enola Gay* controversy, as the revisionist trend clashed with the "victory culture" of "an ingenuous older generation." This climate contributed to the incendiary nature of the *Enola Gay* controversy and provoked an outburst of opinions flooding the media, ultimately undermining the curators' intent to present a balanced and thought-provoking exhibit. The design of the 1994 exhibit aimed to address the topic of the *Enola Gay* and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima during World War II. Unfortunately, this exhibit faced not only the immense power of political pressure, but also the backlash of stakeholders withdrawing or threatening to withdraw support if exhibit content was not changed. While the details and analysis of this exhibit have been written about extensively and exhaustively, including a 430 page blow-by-blow account written by the NASM Director at the time, Martin Harwit, the genesis of the issue is relatively simple. The major NASM stakeholders, including "a well-funded aerospace lobby, the Air Force Association (AFA), and a veterans organization, the American Legion," disagreed with the implications in the proposed exhibit text that dropping the atomic bomb was a choice. Considering

²⁸ Post, *op. cit.*, 267-269

the timing of this exhibit – the opening coincided with the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the end of the war – and given the direct involvement of many veterans in the development of the exhibit content, the implication that dropping the bomb was a choice was very poorly received. It questioned not only the sacrifice made by the veterans and all their fellow soldiers, but it also questioned the fundamental essence of American exceptionalism.²⁹

In response to the exhibit text as it was originally proposed, the NASM was attacked by its stakeholders, the media, various members of the public, and even received threats from the government. In 1994, the Smithsonian Secretary Michael Heyman received a letter from seven Republican congressmen, with a closing censure noting: “There is no excuse for an exhibit which addresses one of the most morally unambiguous events of the 20th century...” Ultimately, the AFA and veterans groups “stepped in and made certain that the story told with the *Enola Gay* was the story *they* wanted” and the original exhibit was cancelled. The resulting exhibit was modified to contain virtually no information or interpretation, merely the fuselage of the *Enola Gay* with short videos of the crew and minimal historical context. Post notes that this controversy marked “when it first became known that stakeholders with sufficient political power could claim ownership of ‘what is exhibited and how.’” This ushered in an age of self-censorship throughout the Smithsonian, as the museum staff saw the full power of

²⁹ Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, *op. cit.*, 117 and 284. For a deeper discussion of “victory culture,” see Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1995); Post, *op. cit.*, xiii; Martin Harwit, *An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of Enola Gay* (New York, NY: Copernicus, 1996). Many other books focus on the treatment of the *Enola Gay*, including Philip Nobile, ed. *Judgment at the Smithsonian* (New York: Marlowe & Co., 1995).

politicians and witnessed the firings of several curators along with the forced resignation of the NASM Director Harwit.³⁰

The fallout from this disastrous exhibit was wide reaching. Within the NASM, the revised exhibit continued to receive relentless criticism from the media, but this time for its lack of content. Reviews spoke of a “historical cleansing” of the exhibit, and a political cartoon in the *Boston Globe* mocked the neutered exhibit by publishing a picture of an empty NASM exhibit room with the accompanying text: “We’re returning to our original mission as the air and space museum.” The AFA, however, was pleased with the final result, as it did not try to “persuade” anyone of anything. Ultimately, the *Enola Gay* disaster was a tremendous defeat for public historians and museum curators. Post argues that ever since the *Enola Gay* controversy, “NASM’s exhibits [have] been ‘framed’ in accord with the ‘worldview’ of its most influential outside constituencies.” Additionally, after the *Enola Gay* exhibit was cancelled, a planned exhibit on airpower in Vietnam was postponed for “at least five years,” out of fear of backlash.³¹

In 1995, historian and former NASM advisory committee member Richard Kohn reflected that “The cancellation of the National Air and Space Museum’s original *Enola Gay* exhibition in January 1995 may constitute the worst tragedy to befall the public presentation of history in the United States in this generation.” This statement reflected the sentiments of many Smithsonian staff members as

³⁰ Harwit, *op. cit.*, 373; Post, *op. cit.*, 274-276; Paul Boyer, “Whose History is it Anyway? Memory, Politics, and Historical Scholarship,” in *History Wars*, *op. cit.*, 116; Wallace, “Culture War, History Front,” *op. cit.*, 186 and 190.

³¹ Boyer, *op. cit.*, 116; Wallace, “Culture War, History Front,” *op. cit.*, 187.

well as public historians nationwide, for the detrimental effects of this tragedy weighed heavily on them, as they recognized that not only was the role of scholar and curator in the museum reduced to near insignificance, the cancellation of the *Enola Gay* exhibit was a tragically lost educational opportunity for the public. Kohn lamented this loss, arguing that “In displaying the *Enola Gay* without analysis of the event that gave the B-29 airplane its significance, the Smithsonian Institution forfeited an opportunity to educate a worldwide audience in the millions about one of this century’s defining experiences.” The *Enola Gay* controversy essentially pitted museum curators and historians against powerful lobbying groups, military officials, Congress, and the media – the curators and historians lost the fight.³²

Reflecting on the weakness of historians in situations like this, historians Edward Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt wrote: “As political players, historians are relatively powerless and unorganized. Facing attacks that may grossly simplify and misrepresent their ideas and intentions, as in the *Enola Gay* controversy, they have few immediate ways to defend themselves.” Linenthal and Engelhardt argue that the *Enola Gay* situation presented a lose-lose situation for historians and curators, for “whether they fight back or cave in to pressure... they may find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being blamed for creating the very problems whose complexities they set out to explore.” With the attacks on historians for presenting “revisionist” history during the culture wars, they became easy targets for criticism and had few resources to defend themselves.

³² Kohn, *op. cit.*, 1036.

Many historians fought back as best they could during the *Enola Gay* controversy, but to little effect. A group of forty historians banded together and wrote a letter to the new Smithsonian secretary, Michael Heyman “objecting to the ‘historical cleansing of the script’.” Others became so angry about the way the Smithsonian bent to outside pressures that they quit altogether.³³

The historians’ objections carried little weight against the clout of politicians and other stakeholders who ultimately controlled the funding of the museum. Under the weight of these outside pressures, Linenthal argues that the NASM ignored the misgivings of their historians, for “the museum gained nothing politically by responding to their concerns,” especially not when compared to what they might lose financially if they did. Heyman, as a newly appointed secretary of the Smithsonian, also had much to lose personally if he were to defend the NASM. Kammen notes that even if Heyman had held firm and supported the museum, he would have lost his job and reputation immediately, as his board of regents would not have been likely to back him. Heyman was forced to assess the situation quickly, and chose to follow the power in Congress. Kammen adds that “Academic freedom was not considered an issue because the Smithsonian is not a university even though it supports original research and scholarship. It is a public institution located in the nation’s capital, subject to the political whims and wiles of Congress,” so there was little point in defending the decisions and rights of the museum. Some consensus exists among historians that the *Enola Gay* exhibit as originally planned “might have been viable at a different

³³ Tom Engelhardt and Edward T. Linenthal, “Introduction: History Under Siege,” in *History Wars*, *op. cit.*, 5; Linenthal, “Anatomy of a Controversy,” *op. cit.*, 51-52.

moment in time, but not on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II... Sound history cannot compete with well-hyped patriotism.” Given the volatile situation, Heyman released a statement after being in office a mere four months, concluding that the NASM had erred and “needed to distinguish between opinion and fact,” recognizing that “veterans and their families were not looking for analysis in this commemorative year.” In the end, as the NASM stripped the exhibit of all information that could possibly be seen as interpretive or critical and left the visitors to come to their own conclusions about the significance of the *Enola Gay*, it was clear that academic integrity would take a back seat, and financial stability was now the prime concern for the museum. While this method did provide a “solution” to the inflammatory issue, the museum ultimately surrendered the opportunity to be an educational institution.³⁴

Writing in 1995, future NMAAHC Director Lonnie Bunch reflected that “The past few years have seen the museum profession buffeted by unfavorable public attention and media coverage, governmental scrutiny, funding uncertainties, and a politically charged inquiry into the role of museums in American society.” Even in the heat of the controversy, Bunch was critical of the Smithsonian’s decision to bend to outside pressures and pull all controversial content from the *Enola Gay* exhibit. He wrote that, instead of waiting out the storm of criticisms, “museum professionals would be better served if they looked and learned.” Bunch defended his opinion by noting, “While this is clearly a moment to be cautious, judicious, and politic, I would argue it is also a time to be

³⁴ Linenthal, “Anatomy of a Controversy,” *op. cit.*, 52; Kammen, *op. cit.*, 285; Harwit, *op. cit.*, 428.

proactive [...] A time not to avoid the current debates, but to immerse the profession in those discussions...” While Bunch stood by his convictions, he was also realistic and gravely aware of the difficulty of the situation. He acknowledged that, “In the age of Newt Gingrich, threats to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities now seem less idle and more serious.” It was clear that museum professionals were up against a formidable opponent.³⁵

In the immediate wake of the *Enola Gay* controversy, very few examples of the “proactive” spirit that Bunch had advocated for could be found throughout the Smithsonian. More noticeable, however, were the many negative effects of the backlash on both museum staff and future exhibits Institution-wide. Historian Michael Kammen examines this backlash, noting: “Aside from the wasted years of research and planning... the most serious damage to the Smithsonian as a system of museums.... was a devastating loss of morale by the professional staff. They became exceedingly cautious in the following years in planning *any* exhibition that might prove remotely controversial.” During this time, museum staff even heard rumors that “conservative superpatriots in Congress sent anonymous staff members to inspect Smithsonian exhibitions, looking for ‘un-American’ displays or wall texts.” In this age of intimidation and self-censorship, scholarly work and historical interpretation was largely abandoned by museum staff, and wall texts became purely descriptive. Only very few cutting edge exhibits made it into the museum, one being the 1998 NMAH exhibit *Between a*

³⁵ Lonnie G. Bunch, *Call the Lost Dream Back: Essays on History, Race and Museums* (Washington, DC: AAM Press, 2010), 129-131. Lonnie Bunch was employed by the NMAH in 1989 and witnessed the effects of the culture wars firsthand.

Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present. This exhibit was devoted to exploring the exploitation of American sweatshop workers, and even included an actual sweatshop with equipment from El Monte, California. While the exhibit managed to briefly make it onto the museum floor, it was not without its obstacles. The NMAH faced legal threats from the California Fashion Association, who warned the Smithsonian that they intended to “turn this exhibit plan into another *Enola Gay*,” and ultimately the government intervened and cut the exhibit short after a 6-month run, for “engaging in a taxpayer-funded smear against the U.S. apparel industry.” Curators Harry Rubenstein and Peter Liebhold only narrowly avoided disaster with *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* by relying on a broad range of scholarship, intentionally keeping their proposed exhibit script out of the public eye, and by making sure that the voices of both the laborers and management were heard. Unfortunately, their (short-lived) success was the exception, not the rule, during this time.³⁶

Most exhibits developed at this time turned away from scholarship and interpretation, including the Smithsonian’s 150th anniversary exhibition in 1996, *America’s Smithsonian*. This enormous 100,000 square foot travelling exhibition featured an “amorphous assortment of items” – items that were deemed inherently “interesting,” like Lincoln’s top hat, Theodore Roosevelt’s chaps, the Mercury spacecraft, a 1948 Tucker automobile, and “a smattering of artworks, gems and jewelry, manmade artifacts from around the world, and specimens from the natural world.” Debuting in the midst of the *Enola Gay* controversy, this exhibit

³⁶ Kammen, *op. cit.*, 286; Dubin, *op. cit.*, 4 and 239.

was a “total flop,” as it self-censored to the point of being unengaging. The exhibit had no continuity aside from “interesting items,” and there was no interpretation or exhibit text. A reviewer for the *New York Times* even wrote, “There are some shows so dull they can’t even give the tickets away.” Historian Dubin interprets *America’s Smithsonian* as being the antithesis of *The West as America* and *The Last Act*. Dubin postulates that “Because the curators played it safe in this instance, it would be impossible to fault *America’s Smithsonian* for theoretical heavy-handedness; no curatorial point of view was apparent. Objects appeared to have been chosen for their celebrity value or visual appeal.” Therefore, “This sort of display is relatively immune from political attack, although it is not necessarily satisfying to the public or to experienced critics of exhibitions.” With the *Enola Gay* controversy ongoing, *America’s Smithsonian* was clearly a reactionary exhibit concerned primarily with playing it safe by celebrating American achievements, in order to attract sponsors. The few sponsorships they did receive were prominently featured throughout the exhibit. *America’s Smithsonian* was one of many exhibits that reacted to the *Enola Gay* debacle by avoiding story-driven content, relying instead on the intrinsic value of their collection items.³⁷

Historians Colin Divall and Andrew Scott were critical of the Smithsonian’s curators for abandoning their duties as educators. While recognizing that it may be nearly impossible to make every visitor happy with each exhibit, Divall and Scott opined that it is nonetheless the duty of a museum

³⁷ Dubin, *op. cit.*, 233-234; Post, *op. cit.*, xv.

“to make visitors aware of the provisional nature of all knowledge of the past, and to help them to develop the confidence and the skills needed to come to their own conclusions based, at least in part, on what historical scholarship has to offer.” Unfortunately, as the Smithsonian was reportedly embroiled in thirty-six exhibit controversies between 1984 and 1998, the Institution as a whole was not prepared for the degree of pushback they received, and were left drained and feeling powerless. The repercussions of the extensive criticism and public backlash impacted many of the Smithsonian museums, particularly the NMAH and the developing NMAI. The devastation from the culture wars ushered in an era dominated by fear and self-censorship, ultimately leading to the production of numerous “patriotic” and celebratory exhibits.³⁸

The Reign of Terror: Fear and Backlash From the Culture Wars

In the post-culture war climate of the late 1990s, the Smithsonian was in dire need of money and willing private funders were scarce. It was at this time that the NMAH was approached by Kenneth Behring with an astounding offer of an \$80 million donation; however, this donation came with strings attached as Behring demanded control over what his money would be used for, including exhibit content. In any climate, \$80 million would be hard to turn down, but after the culture wars, the NMAH was particularly desperate for money and support. Unfortunately, Behring only promised the NMAH the \$80 million if it would “dispense with academically faddish ‘multiculture’ exhibits and ‘really do an

³⁸ Post, *op. cit.*, 269; Maureen McConnell, "A Controversy Timeline," *The Journal of Museum Education* 23, no. 3, Too Hot to Handle? Museums and Controversy (1998), 4-6.

American history museum.” Behring envisioned the museum eliminating the stories of people of different races and cultures, and ultimately returning to celebrating “stories which center on the achievements of Great White Men.” While this was troublesome to many NMAH employees, the Smithsonian was under the direction of Secretary Lawrence Small, a man with “warped priorities” and “no compunctions about accepting donations like Behring’s that came with dubious stipulations attached.” For Small, the most important thing was securing financial support, regardless of the consequences.³⁹

At the time when Behring was considering the terms of his donation, the NMAH featured exhibits including *Field to Factory*, *A More Perfect Union*, *Science in American Life*, and *American Encounters*. As the Smithsonian had cautiously begun to approach topics including slavery and race, Behring saw this as a flaw and used his influence to push the Smithsonian back from this noble endeavor. As Behring toured the NMAH for the first time, he saw these exhibits and was “displeased” with what he saw as a “multiculture museum.” In an interview, Behring revealed that he found the museum to be “So negative.” He went on to say, “There’s nothing here about what made this the greatest country in the history of the world... It just showed the things we did wrong, not all the things we’ve done right.” Ultimately, with the support of an unscrupulous Secretary, the year 2000 saw the NMAH completely revamped and renamed after Behring, in spite of his racist leanings and extensive demands. Behring originally requested the NMAH be renamed “The Behring,” however, this would have taken

³⁹ Post, *op. cit.*, xiv and xvii; Roberts, *op. cit.*, 110.

an act of Congress, so he settled for the NMAH being renamed The National Museum of American History: The Kenneth E. Behring Center, with his name carved into both entrances of the museum and a bust of himself erected in the museum lobby.⁴⁰

Behring additionally demanded that his money be used to have “everything taken out and really do an *American* history museum.” To Behring, this meant getting rid of exhibits about “ordinary people” and replacing them with ones “celebrating ‘large figures and large symbols.’” This culminated in the development of the exhibit *The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden*. Behring’s contract also stipulated that he have final approval over two other exhibits – one of which became the exhibit, *America’s Museum, America’s Stories*, comprising of “a chronological, biographical, and thematic introduction to American history.” While this exhibit struggled to represent *all* of American history in a way acceptable to Behring, his final exhibit, *The Price of Freedom*, presented even deeper issues for curators. As it was known that Behring “would not have warmed to the commission’s push for ‘inclusiveness in the treatment of race, ethnicity, and gender,’” it was settled that the final exhibit, *The Price of Freedom*, would celebrate America’s military history. The resulting exhibit, however, became a “triumphalist reading of U.S. military campaigns as a perennial struggle for freedom from tyranny,” as Behring insisted that conflicts like the Mexican War, “like all the nation’s wars,” be depicted as “a benign and

⁴⁰ Andrew Ferguson, “The Past Isn’t What it Used to Be: The remaking of the mixed-up National History Museum,” *The Weekly Standard*, December 15, 2008, Vol. 14, No. 13. <http://staging.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/015/889iuocz.asp#>; Post, *op. cit.*, 338 n. 10

inevitable outgrowth of American democracy,” allowing the narrative of American exceptionalism to reign.⁴¹

This notion of war and violence as an “inevitable outgrowth” has shaped the national narrative over time, for emphasis on the “inevitable” tends to erase key tenants of historical scholarship, including historical agency, contingency, and accountability. Instead, ideologies of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny have confined the national narrative to affirming and patriotic limits. Against this backdrop, many Smithsonian exhibits, including *The West as America*, *The Last Act*, and *The Price of Freedom*, have been constrained by “a particular set of influential ‘stakeholders’ whose worldview frames its presentations.” In this context, historical scholarship has been forced to take a back seat, and the resulting celebratory narrative has buried conflict and national failings out of sight of the public eye.⁴²

Given the high level of scrutiny, the Smithsonian Institution, particularly the NMAH, has faced many accusations that it has been “unpatriotic” and “un-American.” To Post, it is clear in other museums like the NASM that the backlash from the planned *Enola Gay* exhibit was enough to cause their exhibits to now “rarely lack a celebratory tenor.” The NMAH suffered from this backlash as well, as it also received critiques of being unpatriotic on numerous occasions, especially as it attempted to foray into complex aspects of American history with exhibits like *A More Perfect Union*, *From Field to Factory*, and *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*. The NMAH felt the repercussions of these accusations

⁴¹ Post, *op. cit.*, xvii, 234, 253, and 255-256.

⁴² Post, *op. cit.*, 273.

particularly strongly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and attendance fell dramatically.⁴³

After two years of reconstruction, the NMAH reopened in 2008 with the central exhibit, *For Which It Stands*, featuring the Star-Spangled Banner, along with a dramatic display of 960 reflective tiles creating “‘an abstract architectural representation’ of a waving flag.” The exhibit, which ultimately cost over \$96 million, was designed to be “8,000 square feet of ‘experience,’” which showcased a 30-by-34-foot American flag amidst a “darkened hallway, with the sound of rockets and bombs in the background.” With this exhibit opening in conjunction with *The Glorious Burden* on the American presidency and the triumphalist exhibit *The Price of Freedom*, Post remarks, “It was as if penance had been paid for that ‘package of insults’ in the 1990s.” In this way, scholars including Post have criticized the NMAH for seemingly over-correcting its message and becoming too cautious and politically correct.⁴⁴

James Gardner, curator of *For Which it Stands*, illustrated the struggles he faced with the exhibit in his President’s Annual Address to the National Council on Public History. Gardner explained: “Our goal with the flag and indeed throughout the Museum of American History is to challenge our visitor’s long-held understanding of American history, to challenge stereotypes and assumptions.” While this may have been the goal, Gardner also acknowledged the challenges against reaching this goal because this type of exhibit content is “often a tough sell.” Gardner admits: “Even before September 11, critics questioned why

⁴³ *Ibid.*, xiv, 251, and 280.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xv-xvi, 107, 251, and 279.

NMAH as the nation's history museum did not do more positive, more celebratory exhibits. Now, with troops in Iraq and continuing fears of terrorism, we're even more vulnerable: we risk being deemed unpatriotic, failing to foster the unity essential to the nation in a time of crisis." When visiting the museum today, one has to look very hard to find any exhibit lacking a celebratory nature.⁴⁵

While Behring used his financial resources and power to fill the museum with patriotic exhibits that "he'd want his grandchildren to see," many people, both inside and outside of the museum, have been critical of this "patriotic" approach. Upon viewing *The Price of Freedom*, educator Patrick Roberts noted the failure of the exhibit to fulfill "its potential to invite complicated conversation regarding who and what constitutes the public for whom wars are presumably fought." As the museum returned to emphasizing the achievements of prominent white males, the question eventually began to surface of whose interests were really being served. Dubin notes the prevalence of this question and the duty of contemporary museums to address this issue, as they are "potentially accountable to diverse constituencies," and thus cannot be "subject to the whims of a single wealthy patron or collector." This viewpoint aligns with the NMAH's basic mission, as part of their mission statement indicates that the museum is dedicated to inspiring "a broader understanding of our nation and its many peoples." Though somewhat vague, this mission seems to call for curators to look past the

⁴⁵ Gardner, *op. cit.*, 11-12; As of August 2014, the exhibits in the NMAH included: *The Price of Freedom*, *Gunboat Philadelphia*, *American Presidency*, *First Ladies*, *Star-Spangled Banner*, *On the Water*, *America on the Move*, *Lighting a Revolution*, *Power Machinery*, *Stories on Money*, and a featured exhibit serving as a preview for the NMAAHC

pervasive white-dominated narrative of American exceptionalism, towards one that is more inclusive.⁴⁶

In an effort to correct past failings, many museums have considered whether or not the public should be directly included and involved in exhibit development. This has presented several problems of its own, as noted by Wallace:

“In recent years, curators have reached out to communities they wish to represent and address, seeking to involve them in the process of exhibit production. Excellent in theory, this has proved difficult in practice. In the case of immigrants, blacks, workers, women, and Native Americans, it turns out to be no simple matter to discover who exactly “the community” is. Or who gets to speak for that community...Or how to rebut a group that denies a museum’s right to say anything at all about it without prior approval. Or what to do when an exhibit offers a variety of perspectives on a controversial issue, only to be met with a dogmatic insistence that only one of the perspectives is true...”

The Smithsonian faced and struggled with these very questions and considerations with the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in 2004.⁴⁷

Early in the developmental stages of the NMAI, the Smithsonian Board of Regents understood the importance of considering the input of certain constituencies, and thus made every effort to include members of different Native American tribes in the development process. The NMAI made it its mission to “add the voices of native peoples themselves,” to the museum, openly conceding full control of the storytelling in the museum to “its most generous stakeholders,” who were Native Americans. Unfortunately, what resulted was that instead of

⁴⁶ Post, *op. cit.*, 235; Roberts, *op. cit.*, 110; Dubin, *op. cit.*, 6; “Mission and History,” *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ Wallace, *op. cit.*, 285.

adding the voices of Native Americans to studies by anthropologists, archaeologists, ethnologists, and historians, the NMAI policymakers effectively allowed the stories of native people to become the *only* story told, leaving the museum to be “constituency driven.” This decision allowed the Smithsonian to effectively shirk all responsibility for what had the potential to be a contentious and controversial museum dealing with the deplorable treatment of Native Americans throughout history. Ultimately, the NMAI became another example of Smithsonian self-censorship, possibly still in reaction to the backlash of the culture wars and the *Enola Gay* controversy.⁴⁸

In an attempt to avoid controversy and criticism, the Smithsonian tried to be extra sensitive to the needs and concerns of Native Americans to the point where authority in the museum is almost exclusively in the hands of Native Americans; NMAI legislation decrees that “certain aspects of the building, running, and curating of the institution are only open to people in certain tribes.” Additionally, Public Law 101-185, the Act establishing the NMAI, stipulates that at least 12 of the 23 board members “must be Indian.” The chosen Director for the NMAI, Richard West, was also a Native American, and was selected in spite of the fact that he was a lawyer with no museum experience. Although stipulations dictate that the NMAI board must have a minimum of 12 Native American members, it has been historically dominated entirely by Native Americans – even today their board is composed of 17 Native Americans and only 6 non-Natives. This organization of the governing structure suggests that the goal of educating

⁴⁸ Post, *op. cit.*, 274; Ruffins, *op. cit.*, 98.

the broader public was of secondary concern to fulfilling the Native American's vision, ultimately making the NMAI a museum largely *by* Native Americans and *for* Native Americans.⁴⁹

Similar to the criticism received by the NASM for their neutered *Enola Gay* exhibit, the inaugural NMAI exhibits received criticism for not providing *enough* information on the tragic and shameful treatment of Native Americans throughout American history. In an effort to avoid tension and promote a sense of respect in the NMAI, Director West abandoned his responsibility as an objective museum professional to reflect historical scholarship; rather, he allowed exhibit content to reflect the interpretive desires of Native Americans. Ultimately, the inaugural exhibits involved curators working with twenty different Native American tribes to produce *Our Lives*, an exhibit that would “address Native American identity,” *Our Universes*, which would “focus on tribal philosophies,” and *Our Peoples*, “focusing on Native histories.”⁵⁰

When the native tribal leaders were given curatorial control, this largely removed the experiences of trained exhibit designers, historians, and museum professionals from the picture. A criticism published by Edward Rothstein in the *New York Times* remarked: “It is not a matter of whose voice is heard... It is a matter of detail, qualification, nuance and context. It is a matter of scholarship.”

Rothstein echoes many critics in noting that while the NMAI “has much to boast

⁴⁹ Public Law 101-185, 101st Congress, Appendix F. Subchapter XIII, National Museum of the American Indian, Section 80q-3; Smithsonian Institution, *Smithsonian Year 1990, Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution for the Year Ended September 30 1990*, (Smithsonian Institution: Washington, D.C., 1991), 140; “Governance: Board of Trustees,” National Museum of the American Indian, <http://nmai.si.edu/about/governance/>

⁵⁰ Walkowitz and Knauer, *op. cit.*, 2; Post, *op. cit.*, 274; Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 75.

of,” the goal of making the NMAI “answer to the needs, tastes and traditions of perhaps 600 diverse tribes, ranging from the Tapirape of the Brazilian jungles to the Yupik of Alaska - results in so many constituencies that the museum often ends up filtering away detail rather than displaying it, and minimizing difference even while it claims to be discovering it.” Overall, the exhibits can be seen to emphasize a rather celebratory history, ignoring the tragic treatment of Native Americans at the hands of white European settlers.⁵¹

While this treatment of history, along with the administrative organization of the NMAI, has been criticized as an overly cautious attempt to avoid controversy, museum professionals also approached the NMAI’s content quite differently because they perceived it as an ethnically-oriented museum. For this reason, the Smithsonian made every effort to avoid imposing a narrative constructed by white historians and anthropologists on the history of Native Americans.

One can argue that, in theory, the intended message was one portraying respect through providing a “national forum for presenting American Indian perspectives to a wide audience.” However, in practice, the closing off of exhibits to outside influence “[allowed] native people to self-represent at the expense of adequate representations of history.” This has been critiqued as echoing racial thinking, as the narratives and make-up of the museum largely cannot be questioned by any

⁵¹ Edward Rothstein, “Museum with an American Indian Voice,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2004 http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/21/arts/design/21muse.html?_r=0

non-Native Americans. Ultimately, in the midst of controversy, critical questions emerged over whom this museum was for.⁵²

While the question of public involvement and the fear of backlash and criticism has played out in the NASM, NMAH, and NMAI over the years, more recent controversies show that these issues continue to influence content throughout the Smithsonian. An incident in the National Portrait Gallery in 2010 resulted in Secretary G. Wayne Clough instantly removing a controversial video titled “Fire in My Belly” from the exhibit *Hide/Seek* that was “said to be the country’s first national exhibition devoted to gay and lesbian themes.” While the removal of the video catered to the demands of certain interest groups, Clough received criticism from other groups for removing the video, and especially for removing it “perhaps too quickly,” so as to avoid another public scandal. Historian and former NMAH employee Spencer Crew makes the argument that public historians must cater to their audience to a certain extent, but he also warns against pushy “citizens groups” who may have “conceptions over exhibits they considered too critical of American life.” Even though these groups are often the source of “well-publicized battles and defeats,” Crew is adamant that public historians should not simply give in to pressures from the public; rather, they must “continue to maintain professional standards and [fight] the good fight to keep historical presentations accurate, challenging, and relevant.” Crew marks a need

⁵² Fath Davis Ruffins, "Culture Wars Won and Lost: Ethnic Museums on the Mall, Part I: The National Holocaust Museum and the National Museum of the American Indian," *Radical History Review* 68, (1997), 81; Marjorie Schwarzer, *Riches, Rivals & Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in America*, (Washington, DC: AAM, 2006), 159; Miranda J. Brady, "Governmentality and the National Museum of the American Indian: Understanding the Indigenous Museum in a Settler Society," *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, Vol. 14, no. 6 (2008), 764; Tiffany Jenkins, "Turning Museums into Cultural Ghettos," *Spiked*, <http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/10621#.UqZLJ2RDvRh>.

for historians in the 21st century to push back against the public and their demand for an uncritical celebration of American history. Historian Mike Wallace also warns against catering to public demands and argues that it is essential for curators to exercise a degree of autonomy.⁵³

Wallace notes that it is through trial and error that a museum must figure out the “limits of what can be said,” as there is “a fine line between provocative, controversial, and taboo.” Wallace also notes that a way for museums to try and avoid backlash from the public is to not necessarily avoid controversial subjects, but to preempt the fallout from such exhibits by working with the groups that may be impacted by certain issues. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance for a museum to define exactly who “the public” is and which groups they are aiming to serve. Public historian Pamela Walker Laird argues that it is crucial to define “the public” in order to determine “what should be taught and how.” Crew explains this by noting that the main difference between academic history and public history is the difference in their primary audiences. Crew argues, “In the public sphere the key audience is the general public who bring varying levels of knowledge and interest to the interchange.” Unlike academics, the public is also “an audience whose attention must be cultivated rather than arriving as captive listeners.” This is an important distinction, according to Crew, as public history must therefore differ from academic history in its content, in order to appeal to a

⁵³ Post, *op. cit.*, 276; Spencer R. Crew, “Public History: Past and Present,” in Richard Stewart Kirkendall, ed., *The Organization of American Historians and the Writing and Teaching of American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 301. Spencer Crew was one of the first African Americans to be brought in to work for the Smithsonian in the Museum of History and Technology in the late 1970s

varied audience composed of “agencies, the media, scholars, students, tourists, and web browsers,” of diverse backgrounds.⁵⁴

In the name of audience appeal, however, sponsors often avoid controversial topics; likewise, “cities, unions, corporations, or local townsfolk tend to favor uplifting optimism or blandly judicious balance – exhibits fit for prime time, family viewing.” The concern for family appeal is strong within museums and presents the challenge of creating exhibits that appeal to a broad age group. Wallace posits that “people want to be entertained... They do not want to be lectured, upset, or offended, nor do they want to hear about conflict.” This reality of audience reactions has been the source of great concern for the new NMAAHC, as the museum prepares to examine the history of slavery and racism in the United States. The task of Director Lonnie Bunch and his team of curators is to present this history in a way that is both intellectually rigorous, or educational, and yet appealing to a broad and diverse audience.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, *op cit.*, 120 and 301; Pamela Walker Laird, "The Public's Historians," *Technology and Culture* 39, no. 3 (Jul., 1998), 478; Crew, *op. cit.*, 301 and 312.

⁵⁵ Wallace, *op. cit.*, 123-124.

PART II: The National Museum of African American History and Culture

The Long Road to Establishing a National African American Museum

On December 16, 2003, the 108th Congress passed Public Law 108–184, officially establishing the National Museum of African American History and Culture, within the Smithsonian Institution. It took two more years for the Smithsonian’s Board of Regents to finally settle on the location for the museum on the corner of 14th Street and Constitution Avenue, near the Washington Monument, and the groundbreaking ceremony was held on Feb 22, 2012. While the 2003 act of Congress marked the beginning of a long and difficult road to the scheduled opening of the NMAAHC in 2016 (later than the originally scheduled 2015 opening), it also signaled the end of a decades-long struggle to establish a museum in our nation’s capital representing African Americans. Numerous challenges had to be resolved in order to make this museum possible: overcoming opposition from leaders of the African-American museum movement; resolving conflicts over location, funding, and control of the museum; and addressing concerns that such a museum would only fragment history, and thus do more harm than good.⁵⁶

The African-American museum movement developed during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. John Kinard, founding director of the

⁵⁶ “H.R.3491 - 108th Congress (2003-2004): National Museum of African American History and Culture Act.” Legislation, n.d. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/house-bill/3491/>; Andrea A. Burns, *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement*, Public History in Historical Perspective (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 169; Allison Keyes, “African-American Museum Breaks Ground in D.C.” *NPR*, February 23, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/02/23/147258011/african-american-museum-breaks-ground-in-d-c>

Smithsonian's Anacostia Neighborhood Museum and founding member of the African American Museums Association (AAMA), notes that during this time, many African-American neighborhood museums developed, rejecting the concept that museums needed to be elite institutions exclusively dedicated to high-value artifacts. As African-American history was underrepresented or misrepresented in many existing museums, many African-American communities responded by creating their own museums in their neighborhoods, dedicated to telling their own histories. Scholar Andrea Burns argues that African-American neighborhood museums functioned on the premise that their "museum's employees and volunteers ought to come from the very neighborhood in which the museum was located. Likewise, exhibits and collections should draw their inspiration from the present-day concerns and forgotten histories of the neighborhood, and the black community as a whole." These museums were thus directed by and for African Americans. Burns believes that the NMAAHC will serve to address many of the same goals of the neighborhood museums – presenting current pressing social concerns along with forgotten histories of African-American communities – but will do so on a national scale and be intended for a larger audience.⁵⁷

When the prospect of a national African-American history museum was first introduced in the 1960s, however, one concern that emerged included the possibility that a large national museum would overpower or detract from the smaller African-American neighborhood museums that had flourished over the years. These museums had long been a source of pride and strength among

⁵⁷ Burns, *op. cit.*, 16, 159 and 162.

African-American communities, as they allowed African Americans a space to take control of their own history and contribute to the national narrative within their own “imagined community.” In 1988, Kinard voiced the concern that neighborhood museums, including the Smithsonian’s very own Anacostia Neighborhood Museum (ANM), would suffer “not only financially but also in terms of their ability to secure exhibitions and artifacts.” In fact, during preliminary discussions regarding a national museum, the very existence of the ANM hung in the balance. Burns notes that Kinard’s “long-standing unease” about the future of the ANM began when a 1980 Smithsonian committee report assessed the ANM to be “lacking in national potential.” The ANM was thus considered for absorption into the national museum, in order to remove any redundancies within the Smithsonian in exhibit content. Fortunately for Kinard and the ANM, this idea received considerable opposition and the Smithsonian committee decided that the ANM would remain, with the caveat being that the museum could only focus on the neighborhood’s history and not broader issues of race and representation.⁵⁸

Kinard was not alone in his concerns for what a national museum meant for neighborhood museums. A 1988 AAMA survey of African American Museums shows that many African American museum directors and staff shared concerns that a national museum would be more appealing to already scarce donors, who would likely turn their financial support and fundraising to the national museum. In an effort to secure the future of African-American

⁵⁸ Burns, *op. cit.*, 166-167; Ruffins, *op. cit.*, 83.

neighborhood museums, Kinard and other members of the AAMA proposed that “any congressional resolution to create a national museum must also contain a provision to establish a \$50 million endowment, which would be divided among local African American neighborhood museums.” Such an endowment was never granted. Meanwhile, other opponents suggested that much of African-American history had been lost, that there were not enough artifacts of cultural significance available to existing community museums, and certainly not enough artifacts “to warrant a national museum on the Mall, especially under the jurisdiction of the Smithsonian.” Such concerns over location, funding, and control stalled the creation of a national museum.⁵⁹

In order to push the movement forward, one of the first steps towards establishing the museum was to determine whether or not such a museum was necessary or desirable on the National Mall. While the NMAAHC website claims “The new museum, the Smithsonian’s 19th, will be the *only* national museum devoted exclusively to the documentation of African American life, art, history and culture,” Burns notes that this is not technically the case. Burns cites other examples including the 1987 Wilberforce National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center and the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center that opened in Cincinnati, Ohio in 2004. While these museums are notable for their contributions to the advancement of African-American history, Burns notes that many supporters of the NMAAHC still believed that representation was needed in Washington, D.C. With the National Mall located in the “national political and

⁵⁹ Ruffins, *op. cit.*, 82-83.

symbolic capital,” the NMAAHC’s location on the Mall “presents, both figuratively and literally, a monumental statement about the integral place of African Americans in the national landscape.” Calls for such a museum in D.C. began to surface as early as the 1960s, and proposals began to make their way around Capitol Hill by the 1970s, but heavy opposition and a multitude of debates slowed progress for the next three decades.⁶⁰

One of the prominent early opponents to a Washington, D.C.-based national African-American museum was International Afro-American Museum founder, Dr. Charles Wright. Wright campaigned to prevent Congress from passing a bill supporting a national museum on the Mall, as he had many misgivings about the location and about federal involvement in such a museum. Wright was in favor of a national African-American history museum, but he advocated for it to be located in Detroit rather than D.C., as he believed that “federal oversight of such a project removed control from the very people the museum purported to represent.” While Wright advocated for the museum to be located outside of D.C., another national museum supporter, Tom Mack, argued for just the opposite. Mack was a prominent advocate for a more visible African American presence specifically on the National Mall. Historian Fath Davis Ruffins highlights Tom Mack’s integral role: “Although numerous people may have discussed the idea of an African-American museum on the Mall, Tom Mack was the person who introduced the idea on the national stage.” Tom Mack was the president of Tourmobile, Inc. – a tour bus company that had exclusive rights to

⁶⁰ “Our History,” NMAAHC, <http://nmaahc.si.edu/About/History> - my emphasis added; Burns, *op. cit.*, 159-160 and 166; Fath Davis Ruffins, "Culture Wars Won and Lost, Part II: The National African-American Museum Project," *Radical History Review* 70, (1998), 80.

give tours around the Mall. As an African American, Mack decried the lack of African American representation on the Mall, calling it a “tremendous oversight” of the government. Mack believed this absence was “symbolic of the nation’s profound and officially sanctioned ignorance of the African-American contribution to U.S. history and culture.” This poignant criticism made the location of the museum a critical and emotionally charged aspect for many of the museum’s supporters.⁶¹

Discussions about an African-American museum on the Mall reached their peak in 1984, only to end a decade later, bogged down by the opposition. Progress remained at a standstill until interest reemerged in 2001, led by “veteran civil rights leader,” Congressman John Lewis. Lewis reintroduced legislation for the museum, and succeeded in passing H.R. 3442, which “authorized the commission to develop a plan to create a national museum in Washington, D.C.” While the NMAAHC Plan for Action Presidential Commission officially recommended that such a museum be overseen by the Smithsonian Institution and located on the National Mall, debate still lingered over exactly where the museum should be constructed. Initially, the Commission “recommended a trapezoidal slice of land at the foot of the Senate side of the Capitol,” but this location was rejected by the Smithsonian’s Board of Regents, due to concerns about being “within sight of the building where lawmakers had authorized the slave trade and reinforced Jim Crow policies.” Four additional possibilities were suggested, including the Smithsonian’s old Arts and Industries building (deemed too old and too small),

⁶¹ Burns, *op. cit.*, 160; Ruffins, *op. cit.*, 80 - Fath Davis Ruffins, one of the first African Americans to be employed professionally by the NMAH

with the final selection being the last remaining spot on the Mall on 14th Street and Constitution Avenue, “just northeast of the Washington Monument and adjacent to the NMAH.” This site is significant, as it lies “within sight of locations where slave pens stood during the 1850s and the early years of the Civil War.” Also notable, is that this site was officially declared to be the last available spot on the Mall.⁶²

After the location of the NMAAHC was approved in 2003, the National Capital Planning Commission and Congress “officially declared that the given cross-axes of the Mall now constitute a ‘substantially completed work of civic art,’” indicating that the Mall is thus closed to any further memorial or museum construction. With the National Mall considered as “the most cherished tract of urban public land in United States,” the decision to close the space to further construction was particularly contentious for groups including the Latino/a Americans, who have simultaneously lobbied for a Latino American Museum to be added to the Mall. In 2008, Congress authorized the Commission to Study the Potential Creation of the National Museum of the American Latino (NMAL), giving consideration to many of the same locations that were suggested for and rejected by the NMAAHC, including the old Arts and Industries building; however, as of yet, Congress has not agreed to support the construction of the NMAL.⁶³

⁶² Post, *op. cit.*, 181; Ruffins, *op. cit.*, 78 and 91; Burns, *op. cit.*, 169-170 and 176

⁶³ Nathan Glazer and Cynthia R. Field, *The National Mall: Rethinking Washington's Monumental Core* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 1; Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 311; Burns, *op. cit.*, 176.

While many supporters of the national African-American museum, including Mack, were pleased that a location was chosen on the Mall, they were concerned about the Commission's decision to place the museum under Smithsonian, and thus governmental, control. Mack had long been an advocate for an independent museum on the Mall, funded by private donors, which he imagined would be primarily African-American philanthropy, as funding was equated with control and management. Many other African-American museum advocates, including Charles Wright, echoed Mack's concerns, as they believed that the government "would inevitably compromise the integrity of the stories that a national African American museum must tell." Wright championed the sentiment that African-American museums should be "for us, by us," in order to respond to the "needs and interests of African Americans" that were largely left unrecognized in many museums and public institutions. This sentiment had shaped the course of the African-American museum movement for decades. As early as 1965, when Representative James Scheuer proposed a commission to research the "feasibility of establishing a 'national Negro museum,'" many African Americans pushed back as they believed that "black museum advocates should author [the] bill," instead of the white Congressman. The concept of a government-directed national museum went against everything that men like Wright had fought for over the years. It would neither be controlled *by* African Americans, nor be exclusively *for* an African American audience. As governmental and Smithsonian control of such an endeavor was widely

mistrusted, many believed that such an institution should be independently controlled.⁶⁴

The NMAAHC Commission's decision to place the museum under Smithsonian jurisdiction was particularly concerning and disheartening for many of the museum's advocates, as the Smithsonian Institution was an organization with a poor track record for representing African Americans and other communities of color. In the decades leading up to the Commission's decision, men including Mack and several members of the AAMA, continually pushed back against the idea of Smithsonian control, with the argument that "the Smithsonian's history of racism and neglect of African Americans made its control inappropriate." There was a great deal of concern over whether or not the Smithsonian would fairly address the important historical developments of slavery and racism, and incorporate "the work of controversial black radicals into a national museum." Wright poignantly noted that historically, the Smithsonian "has been more concerned with reptiles and birds than with Black Americans." This accusation was not unfounded, as even a brief look at the treatment of African-American history throughout the Smithsonian's past illustrates that Wright had just cause to be concerned.⁶⁵

As early as 1968, the lack of representation of minorities within the Smithsonian was readily apparent. In the 1968 Smithsonian Institution Annual Report, then-Secretary S. Dillon Ripley, noted the embarrassing treatment (or lack thereof) of non-white Americans within the Smithsonian Institute as a whole, but

⁶⁴ Ruffins, *op. cit.*, 169 and 89; Burns, *op. cit.*, 160-161.

⁶⁵ Ruffins, *op. cit.*, 89-90; Burns, *op. cit.*, 163.

particularly within the MHT. Ripley acknowledged, “Far too little has been done to delineate the history of the ethnic minorities of our country or to single out and describe their achievements.” Ripley also noted:

“American Indians, along with Chinese or Mexican Indians find their culture and their mode of life discussed in the Natural History Museum as curious subjects for anthropological research, related somehow to zoology and other parts of the world of nature. African history is similarly discussed and recorded in depth in the halls of African technology and anthropology. Here and there in the historical museum there may be a reference to slavery or to wars against the Indians, but for the most part our ethnic subcultures, our minority groups, come off very badly indeed.”

In an effort to change this dismal truth, Ripley hired the first African American staff member, a young student named Carroll Greene, to help develop an exhibit called “the Afro-American Experience,” which was to be part of the permanent exhibit, *Everyday Life in the American Past*. Ripley secured funding for this exhibit and had the MHT poised to take on more progressive ideas. Unfortunately, when Daniel J. Boorstin was named Director of the MHT in 1969, he promptly cancelled the entire project, as he was “not inclined to acknowledge the Afro-American in a separate exhibit.” Local activists deemed this cancellation as “at best, an insensitive reaction to a change long overdue,” while others called it “baldly racist.”⁶⁶

As minorities were still grossly underrepresented within the Smithsonian in the late 1960s, Ripley had established the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in 1967. This museum was built in an old 400-seat theater located far from the Mall in the Southeast quadrant of Washington D.C., where the population was

⁶⁶ Smithsonian Institution, *Smithsonian Year 1968, Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution for the Year Ended 30 June 1968*, (Smithsonian Institution: Washington, D.C., 1968), 3; Post, *op. cit.*, 12 and 95-96.

reportedly 80% non-white. While the location of this museum has been criticized as being “tokenism,” for it was placed in a location unvisited by tourists, Ripley defended his decision in the 1968 Annual Report:

“The Smithsonian has been experimenting with a neighborhood museum... the so-called slums are the areas ripe for studies.... To a large extent people from run-down neighborhoods tend to stay there.... Such people, referred to by slogan phrases like "disadvantaged," are likely never to go into any museum. Indeed such people, if badly dressed or ill at ease, may feel awkward going out of their district. They may easily feel lost wending their way along an unfamiliar sidewalk toward a vast, monumental marble palace.... If this is true, then the only solution is to bring the museum to them.”

The issue of racial representation in the Smithsonian remained relatively stagnant until 1979 when Roger Kennedy took over as Director of the MHT. Kennedy was immediately struck by the lack of racial diversity in both exhibit content and among the staff. Kennedy noted that “not a single employee in a job rated as ‘professional’ was listed as ‘minority,’” so he hired the Harvard doctoral candidate in West African history, William H. Harvey, Jr. as a research assistant and “lead recruiter” for “other minority candidates.” At this time, two other young African Americans, Fath Barfield (later known as Fath Davis Ruffins) and Spencer Crew, were brought on as departmental program assistants.⁶⁷

In 2000, Lonnie Bunch wrote the article “Flies in the Buttermilk: Museums, Diversity, and the Will to Change,” reflecting on the issue of representation in museums in the 1970s. Bunch recalls the national meetings and museum conferences he first began attending in the late 1970s, remarking: “I was struck by how few people of color were present,” and of those few present, he

⁶⁷ Post, *op. cit.*, 96, 176, and 180-181; Smithsonian Institution, “Annual Report,” *op. cit.*, 6-7.

found it disheartening to recognize that “many of the people of color who attended the gathering represented racially or ethnic-specific museums.” Bunch chastised the state of diversity in museums, writing: “The limited minority presence in the professional ranks of America’s cultural institutions is a sad comment on the museum profession’s inability to create a permanent workforce that reflects the diversity of this nation. It dramatically reveals the great chasm between the profession’s stated ideals and its daily practices and priorities.” As the lack of diversity was undeniable, museum professionals began to make some efforts, little by little, to at least talk about this obvious lack of diversity.⁶⁸

This new attention to issues of race and representation in the 1970s and 80s brought in a new era for the NMAH. Spencer Crew would ultimately be responsible for developing the exhibit *From Field to Factory* in 1987, and Fath Davis Ruffins would eventually become a curator at the NMAH. Though Kennedy had aided in ushering in a new wave of progress, Bunch notes that it was “still much too soon to be satisfied with the amount done,” as the progress was rocky at best. In the late 1970s, the NASM received criticism for ignoring African American contributions during World War II. Veterans of the Tuskegee Airmen (African American fighter squadrons) accused the museum of “intentionally [underplaying] the important contributions of black aviators in the Second World War.” To the dismay of many, including Lonnie Bunch, the museum attempted to fix this problem by constructing African American mannequins to sit in the fighter planes, suspended high on the ceiling, nearly out of sight.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Bunch, *op. cit.*, 105-106.

⁶⁹ Post, *op. cit.*, 181-182; Bunch, *op. cit.*, 65-66.

In spite of setbacks like this one, it was clear that progress was being made by the 1980s, as more exhibits like *A More Perfect Union*, and *American Encounters* were being featured. In light of this promising change, some people strongly opposed the creation of an African-American museum, fearing that it “would relieve historically white Smithsonian museums from their responsibilities to include Black people in their narratives.” Others argued that a separate museum would only stand to “ghettoize” African-American history and mark it as “other” or fall back into the old racist tendency of “separate but equal.” Roger Kennedy attempted to resolve this conflict by proposing a wing be added to the existing NMAH rather than have a separate museum. While this idea was never seriously considered, Ruffins highlights this instance as indicative of the growing concerns and “implications of a freestanding African American museum.” Many critics doubted that this museum would succeed in appealing to the interests of visitors of all races, and would instead be “a new form of segregation” and a “step backwards” for African-American history. Ruffins explains that this issue was far less contentious when the NMAI was being constructed, as Native Americans often lived their lives independently or “exiled” from the rest of Americans. In contrast, much of African-American history was shared and entwined with white Americans, as they “shared the same lands, the same households and, in some cases, the same family members for generations.” Given the historical significance of the “separate but equal” concept, many people feared the impact of a separate museum.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Ruffins, *op. cit.*, 82 and 93-94; Burns, *op. cit.*, 168; Bunch, *op. cit.*, 69.

The ensuing debates over identity politics contributed to stalling the establishment of the NMAAHC. In 1994, Republican Senator Jesse Helms voiced a concern that many people still have today. Having also opposed Congressional approval for the NMAI in 1989, Helms pointed out the “slippery slope” of fragmenting multiculturalism. Helms argued: “Once Congress gives the go ahead for African Americans... how can Congress then say no to Hispanics, and the next group and the next group after that?” In 2011, with discussion of a Latino American museum on the Congressional agenda, Democratic Representative James Moran voiced concerns that seemingly overlapped with those that Helms had expressed two decades earlier. While Moran expressed concerns that this trend of “breaking up the American narrative” might “irreparably fragment the national story,” he also made it clear that, unlike Helms, he was a firm supporter of the fact that “every indigenous immigrant community” should tell their stories; however, separating each story out from a broader narrative could be problematic. Even after plans for the NMAAHC had been approved, Moran expressed concerns for the future:

“As much as we would like to think that all Americans are going to go to the African American Museum, I’m afraid it’s not going to happen... The Museum of American History is where all the white folks are going to go, and the American Indian Museum is where Indians are going to feel at home. And African Americans are going to go to their own museum... And that’s not what America is all about.”

It is clear that even after plans for the museum were underway, many doubted the ability of the museum to succeed on the Mall. Given the Smithsonian’s long and rocky past, along with the bevy of seemingly irresolvable disputes that had

plagued the concept for a national African-American museum for decades, the fact that it succeeded in ultimately receiving Congressional approval was a surprise to many. Assessing the situation in 1998, a mere three years before the NMAAHC Commission was established, Ruffins concluded that there would be “no African-American museum on the Mall in the foreseeable future.” What Ruffins failed to foresee, however, was the distinct attitude shift that occurred in the late 1900s and early 2000s, that ultimately succeeded in setting the gears in motion for the establishment of the NMAAHC.⁷¹

This attitude shift occurred primarily amongst the individuals who had long advocated for a stand-alone, independently run, national African-American museum in Washington, D.C. Over time, however, it slowly became apparent to many of these individuals that it would not be possible to raise sufficient funds solely from African-American philanthropy. For Ruffins, this fact highlighted how “the legacy of twenty generations of slavery and four of segregation has significantly limited the aggregate personal wealth of African Americans.” As a result of this, it became increasingly clear by the late 1990s and early 2000s, that there would either be a museum under Smithsonian oversight or no museum at all. As stakeholders accepted this reality, many prominent individuals who were initially opposed to Smithsonian control changed their position. Ruffins notes that their new position argued that “African American museums ‘deserved’ federal funds” as a “[reparation] for the sin of slavery.” Ultimately, Congress determined that financial control of the museum would be divided between the public and the

⁷¹ Burns, *op. cit.*, 169 and 177; Ruffins, *op. cit.*, 98.

government, with a \$250 million appropriation coming from Congress, and an additional \$250 million to be funded privately.⁷²

This attitude shift in the early 2000s was crucial for Congresses ultimate approval of the NMAAHC. A 2003 National Survey of African American Museums prepared for the NMAAHC Plan for Action Presidential Commission was sent to 237 African-American museums to assess “the actual and perceived needs” of these existing institutions, and to gauge the degree of support for the establishment of the NMAAHC. Of the 273 museums contacted, only 72 responded to the survey; nonetheless, the results were revealing. Over 100 new museums dedicated to African-American history had emerged in the previous 15 years, noting the increased “affirmation of these cultural institutions by all segments of American society,” as well as “the increased numbers of African American museum professionals.” It was also evident that the African-American museum field was still “maturing,” as a majority of the organizations had no established loan or collections policies. In regards to the NMAAHC, however, 87% of respondents supported the establishment of a national museum, with no one explicitly indicating they would *not* support such a museum. While originally a topic of great debate, only 12% of respondents indicated concern that the NMAAHC would compete for visitors and donations of funds and collections items. Instead, the overwhelming majority indicated they would be interested in collaborating with a national museum by way of partnerships, promotions,

⁷² Ruffins, *op. cit.*, 90; Burns, *op. cit.*, 169. The NMAAHC received a \$12 million donation towards their capital campaign from celebrity Oprah Winfrey. A 350-seat theater within the museum will be named in her honor. Jacqueline Trescott, “Oprah Winfrey Donates \$12 Million to NMAAHC,” June 11, 2013 <http://nmaahc.si.edu/Blog/WinfreyGift>

workshops, or housing temporary exhibits. Since the 1988 survey, more and more African American museums now realized what all stood to gain from such an institution. This survey paved the way for the final approval of the NMAAHC.⁷³

Having overcome seemingly insurmountable odds, the NMAAHC is currently scheduled to open in 2016. Even though Congress managed to work past many of the debates that have plagued the idea of a national African American museum for decades, the struggle is far from over, and numerous debates are still ongoing. These include questions about who will control the content, what the message will be, and who will benefit from this museum. Director Lonnie Bunch, having had a long career with the Smithsonian and questions of race and representation, has addressed many of these lingering questions with a great degree of transparency. Using past Smithsonian exhibits and managerial decisions as a guide, Bunch has armed himself and the NMAAHC with the tools necessary to overcome the odds that have been stacked against the museum since the idea was first conceived in the 1960s.

Curators in Control

Lonnie G. Bunch III is no stranger to adversity. Growing up in the early 1960s as the only African American kid in his New Jersey neighborhood, Bunch was persecuted and attacked for the color of his skin and became acutely aware of the “contradictions and ambiguities of race” from an early age. Writing in 2010,

⁷³ Joy Ford Austin, *National Survey of African American Museums: Prepared for the National Museum of African American History and Culture Plan for Action Presidential Commission*. Washington, D.C.: National Museum of African American History and Culture Plan for Action Presidential Commission, 2003, xiv.

Bunch reflected that his life and career have both been shaped by the “challenge of wrestling with the omnipresent specter of race,” as well as recognizing the “importance of the past.” Childhood interactions with family members and exposure to photographs of countless unknown African Americans imbued him with the spark at a young age to “give voice to the anonymous and to make visible those who were often left out of the historical narratives.” Bunch notes that it took years before he could articulate that interest, but he had always hoped as a child, that by making visible the forgotten stories of African Americans, he “could find answers that would help [him], and later help America, wrestle with our tortured racial past.” Bunch describes how his career path was shaped by his life “along the color line,” as it “impressed upon [him] a dedication to fairness, a commitment to fighting the good fight, [and] a desire to ease the pain of those who suffered discrimination and injustice.” Because of this, he dedicated his life to being a public historian and museum professional, where he could “help us all become more knowledgeable about and more comfortable with ambiguity and with life along the margins.” By 1989, Bunch became an employee of the NMAH, where he witnessed firsthand the consequences of decisions made during the culture wars, and the toll they took on curators, scholarship, and the resulting exhibit content.⁷⁴

Against the backdrop of this personal and professional experience, Bunch has approached the NMAAHC with a fierce resolve to resist any form of outside pressure. One way he aims to improve the power of the museum against pressure

⁷⁴ Bunch, *op. cit.*, 17, 22, and 24-25.

from politicians is by being proactive in his pursuit of political and economic support. In a 1995 article, “Fighting the Good Fight,” Bunch responds to the culture wars as they were unfolding, noting: “Because there are no constitutional guarantees of a vibrant, diverse, and academically free museum community, it is essential that museums do a better job of using the media, lobbying, and utilizing the political system.” Bunch argues that to do this, museums need to “identify potential allies,” for “developing an array of allies – politicians, academicians, journalists, media experts, and corporate executives – is essential if museums are to respond effectively to their critics.” In fact, Bunch even notes that it would be “suicidal not to reach outside the walls of our institutions for these types of expertise, especially because museums no longer have the luxury of remaining above the political fray.” Ultimately, in a volatile atmosphere filled with external political pressures, museums cannot “fight the good fight” alone; therefore, Bunch encourages all public museums to develop their own set of political allies and tools they can use to fight for what they believe in.⁷⁵

As early as 1992, Bunch recognized the “legitimate concerns” that most museums had regarding the “deleterious effects that controversial exhibits may have on funding sources, relationships with boards of trustees, government agencies and their traditional audiences,” citing the NMAA and the fate of *The West as America* under governmental pressure. Having also curated exhibits at the NMAH including *The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden*, Bunch experienced the power of donors like Behring and the control they were able to

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

exercise over exhibit content. While each situation offered its own unique set of difficulties and pressures, Bunch has used these experiences as learning opportunities, and with hindsight, has shifted some of the blame on the museums and the staff. Bunch writes:

“In recent years, we have seen how funding sources (or the lack thereof) and political considerations can affect the work of our cultural institutions. I would suggest, however, that the greatest danger is not from threats to funding sources or pressures exerted by government officials, but from the profession’s willingness, wittingly or unwittingly, to self-censor exhibitions and public presentations, to smooth the rough edges of history, art, and science, in order not to offend in this contentious atmosphere.”

This is not to say that the outside pressures on museums were small or insignificant; rather, Bunch argues that museums and their staff need to “take the risks” necessary to stay true to the museum’s mission. To achieve this, Bunch makes the call specifically to “Curators, directors, educators, collections managers, and trustees” to “participate fully, thoughtfully, candidly, and aggressively in this struggle to define or redefine the place of museums in American life.” The effort to redefine the role of the museum is a critical attempt to resurrect the importance of scholarship and interpretation in museums in order to redefine the national narrative – a practice that was largely discredited and discouraged during the culture wars.⁷⁶

Bunch has also worked to allay concerns about the worrisome parallels between the NMAAHC and its predecessor the NMAI. Post illuminates this concern by explaining, “When the Indian Museum opened in 2004, Rick West did not hesitate to call it ‘constituency driven,’ and because NMAAHC constituents

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 65, 131-132, 163, and 215.

are, like West's, members of a minority 'with a very disturbing history and a set of grievances against the United States,' one might anticipate the same sort of driving force there." Having learned from the shortcomings of the NMAI and the criticisms of their choice to involve Native Americans exclusively in most matters of the museum management and design, Bunch has vowed to avoid this mistake. In his Vision Statement for the museum, Bunch writes, "This is not a museum that celebrates black history solely for black Americans. Rather we see this history as America's history. NMAAHC will use African American history and culture as a lens into what it means to be an American." This includes the fact that the museum will "reflect the best scholarship on black history, no matter who wrote it," in an effort to present the most objective history possible. Bunch recognizes that this decision may not be universally favorable among African Americans, but he has attempted to preempt any backlash by being transparent in his decision-making. Bunch has confidently rested the responsibility of interpreting history on the shoulders of museum staff, as they are trained professionals, whose occupation and duty it is to interpret the past. This is a notable difference from the direction of the NMAI, as there are no stipulations regarding the race or ethnicity of any member of the board or staff in the governing documents for the NMAAHC. Bunch supports his decision by arguing for deference to scholarship and practicing transparency in all matters, but also by working with the public.⁷⁷

While Bunch has worked to resurrect the importance of scholarship and the power of museum curators, he also recognizes the necessity to engage with

⁷⁷ Post, *op. cit.*, 276-277; Lonnie Bunch, "A Vision for the National Museum of African American History and Culture," NMAAHC, <http://nmaahc.si.edu/Blog/MissionandVision>; H.R.3491, *op. cit.*, Section 5.

and share the authority to interpret history with the broader public. Historians Walkowitz and Knauer illuminate how important this is for the NMAAHC by noting, “National museums with massive ethnographic collections, like the Smithsonian Institution, became important sites of struggle for groups seeking redress for past wrongs.” This creates a burden on the NMAAHC, as it begs the age-old question of “Who has the authority to interpret the past to the public?” While the NMAI, NMAH, and other museums of the Smithsonian Institution have struggled with this question in the past, Bunch is confident in the authority of museum curators and calculated collaboration with the public. Bunch is careful not to allow the public to have ultimate power over exhibit content, recognizing that strong difference of opinions exist within groups over matters of interpretation, which can lead to “numerous players [competing] to authorize their versions of the past...” This very issue led to the downfall of the NASM’s *Enola Gay* exhibit, as the museum staff did not account for the powerful “clash between memory’s ownership and history’s interpretation,” particularly relating to events in the recent past.⁷⁸

Given the recent timeframe of the Civil Rights Movement, the “struggle for control of the memory of America’s past,” is of primary concern for Bunch and the NMAAHC. In order to surmount this barrier, however, Bunch draws from past experiences, noting:

“In light of the critical outcry that has been occasioned by many of the museum profession’s attempts to explore contemporary history, including the Smithsonian Institution’s *Enola Gay* and “Science in American Life” exhibitions, it is not surprising that many

⁷⁸ Walkowitz and Knauer, *op. cit.*, 10; Bunch, *Call the Lost Dream Back*, *op. cit.*, 117; Kammen, *op. cit.*, 338; Walkowitz and Knauer, *op. cit.*, 8.

institutions and their research staff are wary of the recent past. After all, presenting the history of the living means treading on dreams and wrestling with recollections both cherished and painful.”

Bunch, aware of the challenges facing the NMAAHC, reflects on the ultimate cause and solution for this daunting challenge, explaining that “It is the primacy of memory, the idea that since one can remember an event, he or she has ownership of that history, that is one contributor to the contested nature of recent public historical interpretation. This sense of ownership means that visitors for whom the episode has direct meaning may be less likely to defer to curatorial prerogative.” Bunch reflects on the success of the NMAH when they installed a section of the Woolworth lunch counter – an artifact that some believed should be celebrated “as the triumph of good over the forces of racism,” while others viewed it as “an important but unfortunate occurrence.” Having learned from the explosive public response to the *Enola Gay* and the mismanagement that followed, Bunch recalled that when the Woolworth lunch counter was installed, “We attempted whenever possible to recognize the legitimacy of these conflicting viewpoints. But we also made sure that their proponents understood that as historians we held the ultimate responsibility for the way the sit-in would be interpreted.” By emphasizing curatorial responsibility and transparency in the overall process, the exhibition was a success that Bunch has referred to as “an instructive case study.”⁷⁹

This experience with the Woolworth lunch counter is just a small glimpse into the curatorial decisions and exhibit planning that will go into the NMAAHC,

⁷⁹ James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, introduction to *Slavery and Public History*, *op. cit.*, xi; Bunch, *op. cit.*, 117 and 123-124.

but the success of this endeavor and the lessons drawn from it bode well for future NMAAHC exhibits. Bunch was also able to draw lessons from the *Enola Gay* disaster, noting that a chasm was created “between what museum professionals see as their roles and how the general public sees and understands museums.” The way to bridge this chasm, Bunch argues, is to “deconstruct museums and the museum profession.” Therefore, in order to curb or overcome criticism, “Museums must explain to people in simple terms, to corporations, to trustees, and to government officials, what museums do, what we are, what we collect, [and] how we arrive at the decisions we make.” It is therefore of the utmost importance that exhibits be primarily driven by historical scholarship, rather than subjective opinions, and presented on a level accessible and relatable to the public.⁸⁰

Bunch has clearly taken this lesson to heart, as he has already put it into practice with the NMAAHC program “Save Our African American Treasures: A National Collections Initiative of Discovery and Preservation.” This program, launched in 2008, worked to involve and educate the public about the process of acquiring and caring for collections objects. The NMAAHC has also already made efforts to “share historical authority with their audiences” through projects like the digital “Memory Book.” The Memory Book was an online effort from 2007-2011 that encouraged users to “post their memories about their heritage, or about African American history and issues in general, as well as their reflections upon the NMAAHC.” Museum staff tagged each submitted entry with key words,

⁸⁰ Bunch, *op. cit.*, 133.

enabling the public to interact with and make connections to the shared stories. This program was so successful that it was temporarily disabled so it could be moved to a larger platform.⁸¹

Bunch understood early on that museums need to “negotiate the tricky terrain between academic history and popular memory,” by “crafting a dialogue early in the exhibition process, with diverse representatives of the groups whose history they hope to chart.” While this has proven to be successful so far, Bunch is realistic in acknowledging the limits of this approach. He recognizes that “These discussions will not address all issues, but they will allow the institution to articulate a vision with clarity and candor, delineate the exhibit process, and initiate a discourse that may limit later criticism.” Ultimately, Bunch indicates that transparency is one of the greatest weapons of a museum curator – a weapon that has been historically underused. As the power of curators to interpret history has come under increased scrutiny in recent years, Bunch argues “that scrutiny must not deter curators and institutions from exploring issues that have multiple or contested meanings.” Rather than fear the query from the public of “Who gave you that right?” (the right to interpret history), Bunch argues that “curators must accept the legitimacy of public questioning and seize the opportunity to communicate to visitors our roles as interpreters of the past and keepers of a public trust,” through the use of historical scholarship and evidence. Bunch learned from his time at the NMAH that controversial or contemporary exhibits were more successful when they were able to include the public by

⁸¹ Burns, *op. cit.*, 170-171.

“deconstructing the historical and curatorial processes, [and] explaining how we arrive at decisions about collecting, exhibiting, and interpreting.” By doing this, Bunch found that the museum was able to “address many of the questioners’ concerns.”⁸²

Moreover, one of the most important factors contributing to the success of this approach is the reliance upon “scholarship, research, and considered reflection.” Bunch believes that, in order for a curator or director to stand their ground against opposition, they must clearly demonstrate that the message and content of an exhibit is in no way based “on whim and personal ideology.” What this also means to Bunch, however, is that curators should not attempt to “resolve conflicts that have existed for generations.” Rather than suggest a right or wrong interpretation, as some have argued the *Enola Gay* exhibit did, Bunch stresses the necessity for curators to “continue to contextualize the past in order to give visitors the tools to use to manipulate history so that they might deal better with the present.” In order to do this successfully, Bunch argues that “exhibits and collections must challenge as well as celebrate, educate as well as entertain, and stimulate as well as sustain tradition,” – a goal that may be lofty, but also, in Bunch’s opinion, achievable.⁸³

While he promotes numerous ideals to which museums may aspire, Bunch is fully aware of the practical barriers facing the NMAAHC and museums like it. Bunch acknowledges that “Even in the best of times [... it can be] difficult to find the civil discourse and institutional support needed to grapple with these issues.”

⁸² Bunch, *op. cit.*, 123, 125, and 137.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 117 and 125.

Additionally, while touting the power of curators and directors to control exhibit content, Bunch recognizes that they are certainly not invincible or impervious to outside pressures, including the very real power of the national newspapers that “publish calls for the dismissal of curators and directors who dare to challenge the primacy of popular memory or the cultural vision of political leaders.” Bunch understands the severity and realness of this threat, as he had watched the events of the *Enola Gay* end with the forced resignation of the Director, Martin Harwit. In spite of the potential risks, Bunch moves forward with the NMAAHC with the spirit and conviction to “fight the good fight,” calling on all curators to “emulate the bravery of the participants in the Greensboro sit-in and summon up the courage and the creativity to face the challenges of collecting and interpreting the recent past.” While fighting the good fight may not be easy, Bunch believes the cause is worth the struggle.⁸⁴

Ultimately, Bunch’s vision for the museum reflects rapidly changing times – times that have made critical discussion of race and representation within the national narrative more possible in many settings. Bunch notes that this change was solidified with the election of Barack Obama as the first African American president in 2008. This election was an “unprecedented and unanticipated” turning point for many African Americans, as the results were something “Only a few dreamers could have imagined.” The moment of Obama’s election had arrived “with breathtaking speed,” before many African Americans even dared to dream that he could win. Bunch explains how Obama’s rapid rise to the

⁸⁴ Bunch, *op. cit.*, 117, 126-127, and 129; Harwit, *op. cit.*, 422.

Presidency was possible by looking at the election through the lens of history. He explains that “history helps us realize that although his rise was swift, it benefited from the long fight for racial justice in America and was built on a history of struggle, incremental change, resilience and hope.” While Bunch rejects the claim that Obama is the first “post-racial” President, implying that issues of race and racism are topics of the past, he is encouraged by the election, for “it signals an era of possibility, an era in which millions believe that America, that we, can be made better.” Capitalizing on this national sentiment, Bunch has emphasized discussions of race and reliance on scholarship in museums, in order to expand the national narrative to include the formerly erased African American narrative. Bunch has worked to turn this narrative, one that had long been “by us, for us,” into one that was “by all, for all,” reflecting a multicultural approach to representing a multicultural society.⁸⁵

African-American History Is American History

Although Bunch cannot guarantee who will actually visit the museum once it opens, he has made it clear that the museum will have broad appeal, and will avoid the “by us, for us” sense that the NMAI and African-American neighborhood museums have been criticized for. Bunch has been vocal in his insistence that the NMAAHC will also avoid “ghettoization,” as the museum is designed to function “not as an intensely specialized, compartmentalized examination of black history and culture, but rather as a ‘lens to understand what

⁸⁵ Bunch, *op. cit.*, 53-55.

it means to be American.” Bunch argues that this will prevent African-American history from being marginalized; rather, it will “contextualize it within the broader narrative of American history.” Ultimately, this will serve to expand the imagined American community and fill in some of the previously ignored and erased stories in the national narrative.⁸⁶

According to Bunch, with a well-constructed museum, the fear over separating out different aspects of American history is put to rest. Instead of tearing apart a sense of community, museums like the NMAAHC or the proposed Latino American museum would “aim to draw audiences together in appreciation of the historical multiplicity of American stories and memories....” The integration of multicultural stories is critical, as Bunch argues that for too often in the past, museums have simply put up exhibits with the takeaway message being “African Americans were here, too.” Exhibits like this do not provoke a lasting impact on visitors and fail to illustrate commonalities and the sense of a shared struggle. Bunch also notes that museums often ““check off” the African-American exhibition and return to business as usual once the exhibition has closed. And business as usual is celebrating whiteness.” Though it is evidence of progress that these museums are at least thinking about issues of representation, Bunch pushes for a more lasting and all-encompassing change to occur within museums.⁸⁷

Bunch believes that a way to engender the sense that African-American history is relevant and inviting to all is to develop a “new integration” that “re-centers African American History.” Bunch proposes to do this by creating

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 176-177.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 67 and 178.

exhibits that “depict the interaction among African Americans and the broader society. These presentations would explore the clashes, the conflicts, compromises and cultural borrowing that is at the core of the American past.” Therefore, “if museums do their jobs right,” the exhibits should resonate with visitors of all races and backgrounds. Horton argues that the NMAAHC might also have a particular draw and relevance for recent immigrants, as the history of slavery illustrates the past and the “hierarchy of color into which people of varying shades [were] fitted.” Immigrants can learn more about the current state of race relations in America through understanding the history of slavery and how it “defined the social, political, and economic meaning of skin color within the American setting.” Many scholars, including Horton, believe that “classrooms cannot be relied on to teach the lessons that must be learned by the vast number of Americans whose collective future may be at stake.” It is clear that the NMAAHC and its curators have a great responsibility to uphold the museum’s duty to educate the public.⁸⁸

The role of the museum in public education was one of the prominent topics Bunch considered in his 1995 essay “Fighting the Good Fight.” As Bunch contemplated “what [the] content of that education” should be, he proposed that it was the duty of museums to contribute to public education by exposing them to multiple points of view. In this essay, Bunch promotes the importance of creative exhibits that challenge visitors to explore their understanding of history. He believes that, “As safe havens, museum exhibits can be forums that stimulate

⁸⁸ Bunch, *op. cit.*, 70 and 178; Horton, “Slavery in American History,” *op. cit.*, 36 and 54.

debate and understanding, arenas that allow audiences to better comprehend the complexity and ambiguity of the past and help them wrestle with difficult issues of race, class and gender.” Bunch is not alone in emphasizing the important role museums must take on in exploring current issues of race and representation. Dubin also acknowledges that museums “no longer merely provide a pleasant refuge from ordinary life, nor are they simply repositories of received wisdom. Museums have moved to the forefront in struggles over representation and over the chronicling, revising, and displaying the past.” This ever-developing role is critical, for, as scholar James Oliver Horton notes, “If we are to have meaningful conversations on race in contemporary society, we must do so within the context of history.” Horton makes this argument based on his self-proclaimed belief that “knowledge will facilitate understanding and tolerance.” Writing in the early 2000’s, Horton argues that museums have already helped effect progress, “As recent changes at several historic sites and museums illustrate, scholarly research and interpretations of race in America have begun to reshape the public presentations of history... America at the beginning of the twenty-first century is a more racially tolerant place than it was a half century ago.” While this may be so, Horton also recognizes that there is still progress to be made.⁸⁹

While most museum professionals agree that issues of race and slavery should be tackled in the museum setting, Horton illustrates why this is often so difficult to accomplish. He describes the fundamental problem facing public historians as being “the nation’s most enduring contradiction: the history of

⁸⁹ Bunch, *op. cit.*, 135-136 and 165; Dubin, *op. cit.*, 5; James Oliver Horton, “Slavery in American History: An Uncomfortable National Dialogue,” in *Slavery and Public History*, *op. cit.*, 53-55.

American slavery in a country dedicated to freedom.” As a nation founded on the principles of freedom and equality, it is easier to ignore the “tough stuff” and the more unflattering aspects of history and celebrate American exceptionalism instead. Discussing the history of slavery and the role it played in American history is “embarrassing, guilt-producing, and disillusioning.” Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, Horton recognizes that “Any attempt to integrate these aspects of the national past into the American memory, particularly in a public setting, risks provoking defensiveness, anger, and confrontation.” Edward Linenthal examines why some people, both Whites and African Americans, are angered by these discussions, explaining “for some Americans stories of slavery should be erased... because they are shameful and better forgotten.” Some African Americans have also made the argument that revisiting stories of slavery are embarrassing and “likely to disempower contemporary generations of African Americans.” In the preface to Lonnie Bunch’s collection of essays, Senator and Mrs. Cohen further illuminate this concern, explaining: “Many believe that such a conversation can only serve to revive old wounds and antagonisms that have little relevance to the social and economic challenges that confront us today.” While there are many people who would agree with this assessment, the Cohen’s note that “Lonnie Bunch... begs to differ.”⁹⁰

From the start, Lonnie Bunch has made it clear that the NMAAHC cannot, should not, and will not “serve solely as a triumphant monument to African

⁹⁰ Horton and Horton, “Introduction,” *op. cit.*, vii; Horton, “Slavery in American History”, *op. cit.*, 36; Edward T. Linenthal, “Epilogue: Reflections,” in *Slavery and Public History*, *op. cit.*, 215; Senator William S. Cohen and Janet Langhart Cohen, preface to *Call the Lost Dream Back*, *op. cit.*, 11-12.

American history and culture.” That being said, it also will not “veer in the opposite direction and reinforce the sense that African Americans have been the perpetual victims of history.” It is clear that Bunch has been a longtime proponent of the importance of addressing slavery in museums, as it is a recurring message throughout his various essays, many dating back to the 1990s. In a speech given in 2005, Bunch connects this lifelong belief to his vision for the NMAAHC:

“For nearly 250 years, slavery not only existed, but it was one of the most dominant forces in American life. Political clout and economic fortune depended upon the labor of slaves. Almost every aspect of American life – from business to religion, from culture to commerce, from foreign policy to western expansion – was informed and shaped by the experience of slavery.”

Bunch wants Americans to accept this truth not only as part of their past, but also as part of their future. Recognizing the severe lack of public institutions that deal with the history and legacies of slavery, Bunch argues: “There is a great need to help Americans understand that the history of slavery matters because so much of our complex and troubling struggle to find racial equality has been shaped by slavery.” While some people may want to ignore the ugly past and turn away from the painful stories of the atrocities committed, Bunch intends to address slavery head-on in the NMAAHC, believing that “until we use the past to better understand the contemporary resonance of slavery, we will never get to the heart of one of the central dilemmas in American life – race relations.” Bunch also notes that through remembering the painful past, we, as a nation, can honor “those who experienced those days,” and “more importantly, only by remembering do we have a barometer to measure what has changed and what has really been

accomplished.” Only by understanding the past can we, as a diverse nation, progress towards racial reconciliation.⁹¹

When Bunch began his work on the NMAAHC, he recalled being “struck by how many people we survey hope that we will downplay the story of slavery.” Bunch sensed that a popular opinion at the time was that the museum should avoid the story of slavery, one “that emphasizes victimization and powerlessness,” and rather counter this image “by emphasizing famous firsts and positive images.” While this may have been a popular opinion in the 2000s, this differed drastically from the popular opinion of merely a decade earlier. With the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in 1993, a strong movement favored the creation of a museum that *exclusively* treated the issue of slavery as “an American holocaust.” Upon seeing the USHMM, some African Americans began to ask, “Why can’t we have a museum like that...?” Some people today still adhere to the idea that the museum should be more like the USHMM, serving as “a memorial to the millions who lived and died in slavery.” Lonnie Bunch’s vision for the NMAAHC strives to combine these two divided camps by providing “opportunities for audiences to embrace and even revel in the ambiguities of the past.” He aims to create a museum that is filled with “a richly nuanced history that is replete with great joy and great sorrow and that helps visitors to see that museums do more than offer simple answers to the complex questions of the past...” As the Smithsonian Institution has come under fire on several occasions for not being “patriotic enough,” Bunch must carefully

⁹¹ Bunch, *op. cit.*, 59, 62-63, and 187.

find a balance between the tragedy of slavery and what he refers to as the “triumph of resiliency.”⁹²

Reflecting on the idea of “patriotism” when dealing with tough issues like slavery, historian John Hope Franklin, Chairman of the National Park System Advisory Board in 2000, argues that “The places that commemorate sad history are not places in which we wallow, or wallow in remorse, but instead places in which we may be moved to a new resolve, to be better citizens.” Franklin argues that, rather than stories of slavery and racism being interpreted as evidence of “contemporary historian’s hatred for America,” exhibits must carry a broader message – one of self-reflection and self-improvement, all for the greater good. Historian Edward Ball emphasizes the importance of reconciliation in order to make America a better place for the future. He writes that reconciliation is “about coming to terms with the violence and suffering, chaos and anger and fear in our heritage, and saying: ‘We accept this, and together we will transcend it.’” Burns echoes this sentiment by stressing the need for the NMAAHC to serve as an inspiration for the betterment of future race relations by noting that “the museum should critically provoke diverse audiences to realize that the work begun by generations of black museum leaders and civil rights activists is not yet finished.” Bunch echoes many of these sentiments in his own essays and his goals for the NMAAHC.⁹³

In reflecting on his past experiences as part of the Smithsonian Institution, Bunch recalls being approached by a member of Congress in the mid-1990s,

⁹² Bunch, *op. cit.*, 26-27 and 67; Ruffins, *op. cit.*, 84-85.

⁹³ Linenthal, “Epilogue: Reflections,” *op. cit.*, 216 and 224; Burns, *op. cit.*, 187.

during the *Enola Gay* controversy, and being asked if he had a political agenda. Bunch recollects, “While I did not know how to answer that question then, I now know that I do have a political agenda: to use history to make America better.” Bunch hopes to use history as a “weapon” in the NMAAHC. He writes, “For me, history illuminates all the dark corners so that we can make informed choices, allowing us to better fulfill our obligations as citizens and to understand the daunting challenges faced by our nation.” Quoting John Hope Franklin, Bunch cites that History is “the great corrective,” so while “looking back may hurt,” the act of remembering the past will lead to “healing and true racial reconciliation.” While the NMAAHC may strive to establish lasting racial reconciliation, history dictates that this will neither happen overnight, nor will it happen easily. Looking back on past Smithsonian exhibits including *The West as America*, Bunch lauds the early attempt to “demonstrate how cultures interact, clash, and change.” While this exhibit and others like it were not necessarily met with success, Bunch still counts them as “important, though preliminary, efforts to make exhibits more inclusive, stimulating, and challenging.” He also notes, “Despite two decades of substantive progress and change, whiteness is still the gold standard in museums,” therefore, “despite the criticism and pressure, museums must not retreat from wrestling with the difficulties of diversity.” While the progress that has been made over the past few decades is laudable, this is no time for curators to rest on their laurels, as there is still a long way to go.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Bunch, *op. cit.*, 28-29, 67 and 165.

As Bunch and the staff of the NMAAHC worked to define and shape the desired content of the museum, they were initially faced with a position unique from any of the other Smithsonian museums: they had the luxury and burden of starting the collection from scratch. This has allowed them to give the museum and its collection the shape they envisioned, through developing “a collection of materials that reflects the diversity of the African American experience.” Instead of being saddled with a collection of items that may or may not fit with their desired exhibits, Bunch and his staff have been able to seek out items that match the narrative they are crafting in three distinct categories. The organization of the museum includes “History,” with an anchor exhibit on slavery; “arts and culture,” which will include exhibits on the music and entertainment industry; and “community,” including exhibits on sports, military history, and “the power of place.” Notable items and set pieces that will represent this “power of place,” include two pieces that were so large, they had to be physically built into the museum during early stages of construction. These two items are a segregated Jim Crow-era train car and a 21-foot tall guard tower from the Louisiana State “Angola” Penitentiary. Other notable collection items include a letter signed by Toussaint L’Ouverture, the original coffin of Emmett Till, and 39 items that once belonged to Harriet Tubman, including her hymn book. Over 25,000 artifacts have been collected for the museum, but Bunch still has a “wish list” of things he would love to acquire, including a slave cabin or slave ship, and “the [cool] tuxedo that Jerry was wearing on the album cover ‘The Ice Man Cometh.’”⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Burns, *op. cit.*, 171; Post, *op. cit.*, 277; Erica R. Hendry, “Installing an Artifact in a Museum That Hasn’t Even Been Built Yet,” *Smithsonian.com*, November 15, 2013,

Even the architecture of the NMAAHC can be considered part of the collection, or as an exhibit in and of itself. Designed by a Ghanaian-British architect, David Adjaye, the museum is set to be a “modernist structure infused with African motifs.” The museum is designed to stand out on the Mall, “where white Tennessee marble is the norm,” as the outside of the structure will be covered with thirty-six hundred bronze panels – a design that is meant to darken with age, modeled after “the ornamental metal castings that were done by slaves and former slaves in Charleston and New Orleans before and after the Civil War – using techniques that had been developed much earlier in Benin and other African cultures.” The entire structure, inside and out, is deeply symbolic. Adjaye designed the entrance hall ceiling to be “an inverted bowl made from thousands of lengths of split pine – symbolizing the vast numbers of Africans who were brought to this country as slaves.” Adjaye explains: “I want the architecture to make you feel the weight of an enormous body of history, which you will then go in and explore.” Even the silhouette of the museum was designed to reflect the columns of Yoruba shrines, as Adjaye considered what the prominent architecture of Africa would have been at the time when Africans were being taken to America. Adjaye made these design decisions bearing in mind that “this museum is not just about slavery. It’s about who we are and where we came from.”⁹⁶

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/installing-an-artifact-in-a-museum-that-hasnt-even-been-built-yet-180947712/?no-ist>; Jacqueline Trescott, “Lonnie Bunch, Gathering Pieces for National Museum of African American History,” *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/03/AR2009090303511.html>; Keyes, “African-American Museum Breaks Ground in D.C.,” *op. cit.*

⁹⁶ Calvin Tomkins, “A Sense of Place,” *The New Yorker* (September 23, 2013), 76-78.

In building the collection for the NMAAHC, Bunch sought out artifacts that would also reflect this vast expanse of time and space that is encompassed by African-American history. While Bunch has had enormous success building the collection by calling on the public to examine their own collections for pieces that could illustrate the African American story, he has also kept the collections of the other Smithsonian museums in mind. Learning from the NMAI, which has been criticized for lacking content that inspired the visitors to think critically, Bunch has made every effort to amass a dynamic and thought-provoking collection. Bunch's quest to gather the best collection possible, however, has required serious considerations on behalf of other Smithsonian Directors, as several museums have considered donating some of their own artifacts to boost the NMAAHC collection. One item of particular debate and concern is the Woolworth's lunch counter currently located at the NMAH. This item would clearly fit into the scope and mission of the NMAAHC, and some Smithsonian members have even expressed interest in donating this iconic item to the NMAAHC. However, if this artifact or others like it were removed from the NMAH, not only would this hinder the NMAH's "ability to tell the full story of this crucial moment in the Civil Rights Movement," but more significantly it would "[strip] the American history museum of its African-American material," which would leave the NMAH as "the 'white museum,'"— even more so than it already is. As it stands today, items including the Woolworth Lunch Counter will remain in the collection

of their current institutions, with the potential for being loaned to the NMAAHC for future exhibits.⁹⁷

In the meantime, Bunch has set his focus on opening the NMAAHC with the collection he has amassed already. Leaving the NMAH with insufficient artifacts to tell a full story would go against everything that Bunch has been fighting for for so long. Ultimately, Bunch accepts the reality that his curatorial decisions will never be able to please everyone. In 2012, he stated: “I think we are going to get an amazing array of people who will love this museum and say it’s a pilgrimage [site], as we will get others who will say, ‘He didn’t make slavery painful enough,’ or ‘He emphasized it too much.’ I expect to be criticized from all ideological perspectives. When that happens, I know we have done our job right.”⁹⁸

Throughout his career, to date, Bunch’s decisions and leadership have embodied the notion that African-American history *is* American history. As Director of the NMAAHC, he has made it clear that he is “not creating an African American museum just for African Americans.” While building the museum collection, he notes his goal “is not to have everything [be] black in our museum, but to have people come to this museum and we provide a window to the story.” Ultimately, Bunch’s vision for the NMAAHC is to aid in the education and inspiration of all members of the public, in order to make America a better informed and more accepting nation. The NMAAHC will serve as a monumental

⁹⁷ Tomkins, *op. cit.*, 78; Bunch, *op. cit.*, 172 and 175.

⁹⁸ DeNeen L. Brown, “Lonnie Bunch’s Vision for the Museum of African American History and Culture,” *The Washington Post*, February 17, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/lonnie-bunchs-vision-for-the-museum-of-african-american-history-and-culture/2012/02/06/gIQAffc8JR_story.html

step towards expanding the American national narrative to be more inclusive of the diverse peoples and histories that constitute the United States. In 2005, Bunch delivered a speech that illuminated both his lifelong dream and vision for the NMAAHC, and he left his listeners with these parting words: “What a gift it will be when museums help the public understand that they are shaped and touched by African American history – all the day, every day.”⁹⁹

EPILOGUE

Amidst the NMAAHC’s great strides towards expanding the national narrative, other Smithsonian museums, including the NMAH and the NMAI, have begun updating their exhibits to be more diverse and inclusive, addressing historical moments often overlooked within a more limited exceptionalist narrative of the United States. Since 2009, the NMAH has also hosted the National Museum of African American History and Culture Gallery – an exhibit space dedicated to featuring eight exhibits between 2009 and 2016, as a preview for the NMAAHC. While this gallery has provided an increased representation of African American history in the NMAH, the question remains, what will happen after the opening of the NMAAHC – will the NMAH once again become “the white museum”? Fortunately, a trend in exhibit updates suggests that greater attention to diversity has already begun to work its way into other exhibits.

Within the NMAH, updates to the “Artifact Walls” and the *American Stories* exhibit have notably included Americans of diverse racial and cultural

⁹⁹ Brown, *op. cit.*; Trescott, “Lonnie Bunch,” *op. cit.*; Bunch, *op. cit.*, 70.

backgrounds. The Artifact Walls, glass-fronted cases that line the first and second floors of the Museum's main atriums, showcase a wide range of items representing the diverse experiences and contributions of Americans, including Mexican, Russian, Czechoslovakian, and European immigrants; the experiences of Japanese plantation workers; and the lives of Asian and Middle Eastern shop owners. The contributions of African Americans are also represented, including items from the Harlem Globetrotters and other prominent African American figures like Duke Ellington and "Dizzie" Gillespie. The Artifact Walls and their accompanying information panels highlight not only the presence of Americans of truly diverse origins, but also the numerous contributions that these individuals have made to the shaping of the U.S. today.¹⁰⁰

Meanwhile, the exhibit *American Stories*, a space that highlights over one hundred items to illustrate American history from 1620 onward, has been updated to include many items representative of a diverse American nation. The goal of *American Stories* is to highlight "the ways in which objects and stories can reinforce and challenge our understanding of history and help define our personal and national identities," by providing an "inclusive representation of the experiences of all Americans." The exhibit has included items such as Native American wampum, Jewish items used to celebrate Passover, several items from Hispanic New Mexico, and a Buddha statue carved by an Japanese American man interned during WWII, to name a few. African Americans are also well-represented with items including a slave ship manifest, tools used by enslaved

¹⁰⁰ As observed from a visit to the museum in January 2015.

African Americans on a tobacco plantation, slave shackles, a cotton gin, a U.S. Colored Troops Medal of Honor, and Muhammad Ali's boxing gloves. While these items mark an important step towards representing a diverse American nation, the exhibit also features label texts that provide critical background on the history of racism and inequality within American history. The exhibit allows a critical look at the American past, and is also notably the "first general subject exhibition for which the museum has translated all the labels into Spanish," in addition to a bilingual website.¹⁰¹

During this same period, the NMAI has made updates to its content by featuring exhibits that offer critical perspectives on U.S. history. A new exhibit in the NMAI, *Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and the American Indian Nations*, illustrates centuries of broken treaties and promises made between the United States government and Native Americans, noting that the struggle continues today. The NMAI has also expanded the scope of its exhibit content by including an exhibit co-organized with the Smithsonian's Latino Center, featuring ceramics from Central America, with exhibit text presented in both English and Spanish. Ultimately, both the NMAH and the NMAI have made efforts to push past the narrative of white American exceptionalism, to recognize and include a more diverse and complex narrative of U.S. history.

While such updates indicate progressive change, numerous challenges remain – the latest being a battle for a National Women's History Museum

¹⁰¹ ""American Stories' Exhibition Opens at National Museum of American History," NMAH, April 12, 2012, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/press/releases/%E2%80%9Camerican-stories%E2%80%9D-exhibition-opens-national-museum-american-history>

(NWHM) on the National Mall. Following nearly two decades of advocacy, Congress finally approved legislation on December 12, 2014 to create a “privately funded, bipartisan congressional commission to study and produce a plan for a national women’s history museum in the nation’s capital.” Though not a Smithsonian museum at this time, the museum has had an online presence since 1996, and organizers plan to pursue a Smithsonian affiliation once a physical site is established for the museum. In its quest to establish its place on the Mall, the NWHM has faced many of the same issues that have been tackled by the NMAAHC over the years. Barriers facing the museum include concerns over funding, exhibit content, and representation of voices. Some supporters of the museum, including actress and sponsor Meryl Streep, believe that women – who make up 51% of the population – are deeply underrepresented in museums. Many supporters believe a museum is long overdue, citing the incongruity: “There is a postal museum, a spy museum and a textile museum. There's even a building that's a museum about buildings. But there is no national women's museum.”¹⁰²

Not all women share this enthusiasm or support for the museum, however, including former Congresswoman, Michelle Bachmann. Bachmann was one of 33 House members who opposed the commission to create a women’s history museum of the Mall. While Bachmann was not against a greater recognition of women’s history in museums, she shared the concern of over 500,000 members of

¹⁰² “Congress Votes To Create Congressional Commission To Study Creation of National Women’s History Museum,” National Women’s History Museum, December 12, 2014, <http://www.nwhm.org/blog/congress-votes-to-create-congressional-commission/>; “About Us,” National Women’s History Museum, <https://www.nwhm.org/about-nwhm/>; Andrea Stone and Christina Wilkie, “National Women’s History Museum Makes Little Progress After 16 Years,” *Huffington Post*, April 13, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/08/national-womens-history-museum_n_1408662.html

the Concerned Women for America, when she argued that the proposed NWHM did not have enough safeguards to guarantee equal and fair representation of all views of women's history, particularly the voices of conservative pro-life advocates. President of Concerned Women for America, Penny Nance, echoed these concerns, noting: "So far, this museum project, via its attached website and board, has clearly reflected the views of women on the left while ignoring the other half of American women... Conservative women have been vastly underrepresented in this museum." Nance goes on to argue that "the museum fails to accurately and completely portray the women it does cover," as it ignores the pro-life views of early suffragists.

While Bachmann and Nance were primarily concerned about how representative the exhibit would be, Nance argued for another reason to reject the NMWH proposal. Nance believes that the museum is not necessary, citing the fact that "There are already 19 Smithsonian museums and galleries in Washington, D.C. that could showcase the role of women in history." For Nance, adding another museum would be a waste of time, space, and resources. Many have disagreed with Nance on this matter, however, including political writer Susan Milligan. Milligan defended the creation of the NMWH by acknowledging: "Ideally, we wouldn't need a women's history museum, because women ought to be included in the teaching and celebration of history. Unfortunately, that's not the case." While many supporters of the NMWH wish that Nance was correct in her belief that the museum was unnecessary, they nonetheless acknowledge that a single institution dedicated to women's history is most likely the best way

forward. As the struggle to create this museum has played out both in Congress and in public, as it once did with the NMAAHC, it is clear that the nation remains divided over how best to present a more inclusive and representative national narrative.¹⁰³

American society has arguably become more conscious of the diversity of the United States, perhaps evidenced by the election of the first African American President of the United States in 2008, or perhaps the diversity of exhibit content throughout museums nationwide. This new openness facilitated the creation of the NMAAHC and has simultaneously created space for incremental changes in the other Smithsonian museums from the NMAH to the NMAI. That said, the quest to present a truly representative national narrative is far from complete, as many groups, including women, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, Irish Americans, and members of the LGBT community, continue to pursue representation in the national narrative, sometimes in the form of independent museums. While the ideology of American exceptionalism continues to shape historical developments within and beyond the United States, the work of public historians such as Lonnie Bunch suggests that a powerful expansion of the definition of what it means to be an American is fully underway.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Penny Nance, "Honor the True Legacy of All Women: Rep. Michele Bachmann is absolutely right about the National Women's History Museum," *U.S. News Readers' Letters and Comments Blog*, May 13, 2014, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/letters-to-the-editor/2014/05/13/michel-bachmann-is-right-about-the-national-womens-history-museum>; Susan Milligan, "Michele Bachmann Doesn't Get Feminism: Bachmann needs a better understanding of women's rights and history," *U.S. News Readers' Letters and Comments Blog*, May 9, 2014, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/susan-milligan/2014/05/09/michele-bachmann-misses-the-point-on-womens-rights-and-history>

¹⁰⁴ For a discussion of Obama and current views on American exceptionalism, see Karen Tumulty, "American Exceptionalism, Explained," *The Washington Post*, September 12, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/09/12/american-exceptionalism-explained/>

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