

At Last, a Black History Museum

Edward Ball

When I was sixteen and growing up in New Orleans, I stole a bottle of liquor from a supermarket and was caught. The judge sentenced me to the mild punishment for white teens, a tour of the Louisiana State Penitentiary. “Go up to Angola, son,” he said, “then after that your record’s wapped clean.”

With twenty other boys I took a bus three hours upriver from New Orleans to Angola, the 140-year-old prison farm on the Mississippi. We did not know that the prison was once a cotton plantation owned by Isaac Franklin, a slave trader. We did not know that three quarters of the five thousand inmates were black, and that they worked as forced labor on the jailhouse farm.

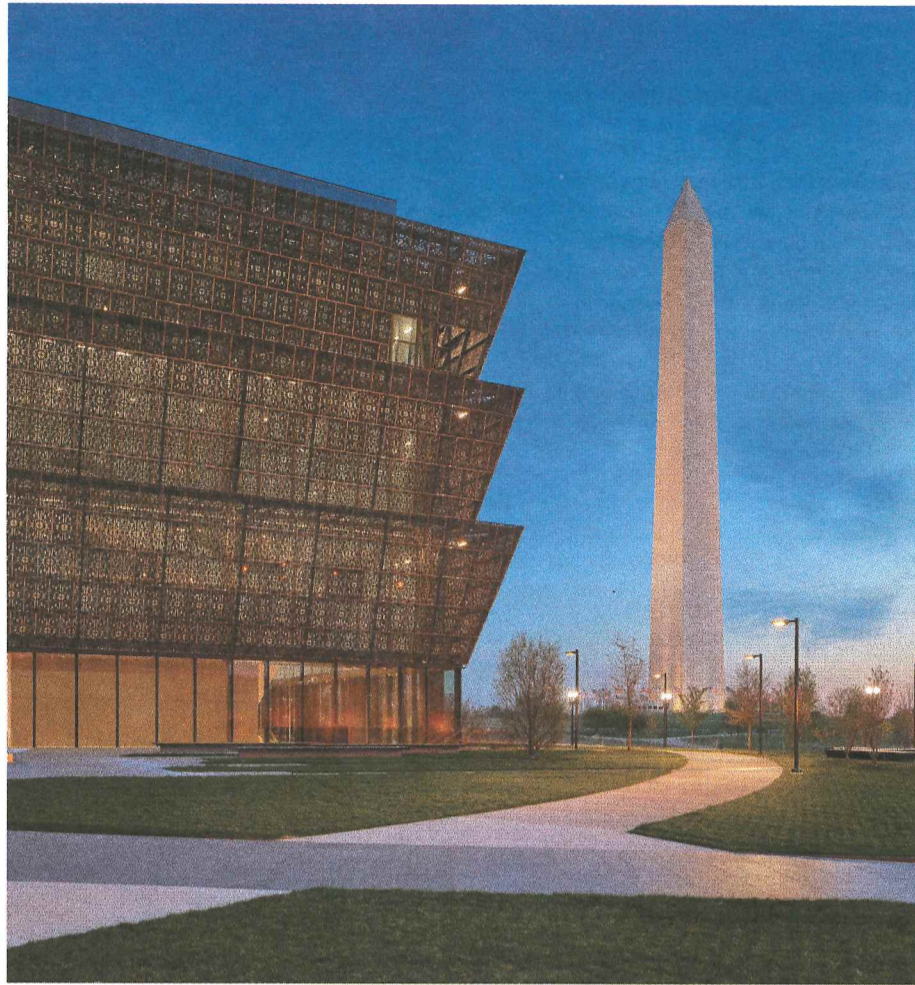
I remember the black gangs bent low in the fields, hoes rising, the guards on horseback with shotguns. I remember the wordless inmates in “Camp H,” at the edge of the farm, where we ate fly-covered chicken with black lifers. And I remember the guard towers. Out in the soybeans, they looked like two-story insects, with concrete legs, pillboxes for heads, and guns in the windows.

Last month, I again saw a guard tower from Angola’s Camp H, improbably, on the Mall in Washington, D.C. (see illustration on page 16). The glowering, repellent thing stands inside the new “black Smithsonian,” the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which opened in September, after a hundred-year delay. Attempts to make a museum of black life first stirred in 1915, to honor black Civil War veterans. On a daylong visit I heard a journalist muttering, “How long, watchman, how long?,” a spiritual from the sea islands off South Carolina.

As a panoramic view of black history and of living culture, the new museum is a conspicuous shift in collective memory and national self-knowing. The name may be awkward—NMAAHC is the abbreviation—but it tells you that the place is about both history and the present, what black people have done and do.

Paul Gardullo is the museum curator and the man who acquired the Angola guard tower. “We wanted to tell a story of the legacy of slavery as seen in the plantation prison system,” he says, naming one of the countless plots that run through the vast, 400,000-square-foot museum. Gardullo explains that Burl Cain, then warden at Angola, was receptive to sharing his jail’s tale, so the Louisiana Department of Corrections volunteered a guard tower. The jailers apparently accept that Angola is a prominent name in the history of black mass incarceration. “The tower speaks to the surveillance of the black community,” Gardullo says, “not incarceration alone, but the general watching of black life through centuries.”

The White House has a more optimistic spin. “The story that this museum tells,” President Obama said at the dedication, attended by the two previous presidents as well as one daughter of a slave, “[is] one of suffering and delight; one of fear but also of hope; of wandering in the wilderness and then seeing out on the horizon a glimmer of the Promised Land.”



The Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, which opened on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in September 2016

White buildings stand near the NMAAHC, which is copper in color, a brown blur next to the cream pencil of the Washington Monument. Miles of pale stone in official Washington, plus columns and porticoes, say, “We are managing things.” The brown museum looks like the Negro in the room. “I knew we did not want a white building,” says Lonnie Bunch, the museum’s founding director.

The serrated silhouette of the building, designed by a four-firm team, Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup, is meant to be taken in a glance. Design architect David Adjaye has said that the building replicates the capital of a Yoruba staff. It is a fantastic shape, an inverted ziggurat. The NMAAHC suggests a fable before you enter. The architects say that their building’s exterior, a lacelike metal curtain, pays tribute to the enslaved ironworkers of Charleston, South Carolina, and New Orleans. The reference seems unnecessary, even dubious. Some portion of the wrought-iron work in Charleston was made by enslaved people. But the cast-iron balconies in New Orleans were made in forges in the North and stamped by machines. They were not the product of black hands, or even of the black South.

The building is a decorated shed, and good enough for its purpose. The NMAAHC has its tracery decoration, wrapped around a glass box, the shed. The interior spaces and circulation, including an airport-like lobby and meandering galleries, do not rise to meet expectations, except for the central hall, a fifty-foot-high, three-hundred-foot-long room. So the building is something of an Oreo—black on the outside, white in the middle.

The primary face behind the new institution has been John Lewis, the Georgia congressman and brave activist of civil rights days. Lewis introduced the museum’s enabling legislation for fifteen sessions, beginning in 1988, when Jesse Helms, the white supremacist senator from North Carolina, made it his duty to block anything that had to do with “the nigra.” When Helms retired, Lewis moved passage of the law, which President George W. Bush signed in 2003. The NMAAHC became the nineteenth Smithsonian, and the federal faucet opened, releasing \$270 million. But by the post-Ronald Reagan logic that public culture must be paid for with private money, the same amount had to be raised, as it was from foundations, rich people, and big companies.

The Walmart Welcome Center is among the first things you glimpse in the lobby (without greeters, however). Proceed downstairs by way of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Staircase, past the Oprah Winfrey Theater and the Kaiser Permanente Sweet Home Café, down further using the United Technologies Escalator, and enter the David M. Rubenstein History Galleries seventy feet underground. Corporations and the one percent certainly like to tattoo their names; but it is rich to see black life as a marketing opportunity.

Oprah Winfrey put up \$21 million and shared some of her collection of slave memento mori, and is to be praised for that. Many of the whips, branding irons, and shackles that fascinate and repel in the history galleries are labeled “Gift of Oprah Winfrey.” By contrast, Bank of America gave \$2 million after settling with the Justice Department for \$16.7 billion to halt prosecution for mortgage bond sales, some of which in-

involved predatory lending against black borrowers. The bank’s pocket change gift is corporate blackface.

The scale is breathtaking—85,000 square feet in the inaugural exhibition, 496 display cases, a flood of objects, and 160 photo montages, audio clips, and short videos looping on ubiquitous screens. Height restrictions in Washington (no building higher than the slave-built US Capitol dome) meant digging down to create four floors of the museum below ground level. This permits a spatial allegory for the galleries, helped by ramps between the floors. The idea is to move the visitor from the story of black captivity, told underground in dark, tunneling rooms, and to rise away from it, floor by floor, past stations of (gradual) entitlement, up through history, climbing a mountain into the light and space of the top floors, where blackness is celebrated as America’s gloried cultural capital.

Like a religious pilgrim moving through stations of the Cross, *imitatione Christi*, the visitor walks the generations of the enslaved, starting with the capture and deportation of West Africans, through scenes of the Middle Passage, to the landing places of colonial captivity. A wall names 499 slave ships that crisscrossed the Atlantic. Pieces of a Portuguese slave ship, the *São José*—shipwrecked off South Africa in 1794, killing hundreds of captives, and raised from the ocean bottom in 2014—fill a darkened room like saints’ relics.

On to the plantation crop era and mass incarceration on farms—a million people before the Revolution, four million by the Civil War—tobacco in the Chesapeake, rice in the low country of South Carolina, cotton from Georgia to Mississippi, sugar in Louisiana. These galleries feel like memorials of social death in the fields.

Rooms are thick with reproduction images, thinner with artifacts. An iron sugar kettle, from around 1800, in which slaves boiled cane for months during harvest. Smoking pipes dug up from a Maryland plantation. A red flag that hung outside one of Charleston’s slave auction houses. Much is borrowed from other museums, like a slave collar and key (“on loan from the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches”). When a discovered object appears, it gets star treatment. There is a gunpowder horn that belonged to Prince Simbo, an enslaved private during the American Revolution. No larger than a banana, the horn inhabits a case as big as a closet, hanging in the air, gorgeously lit, lovingly described.

The story is wonderfully carried forward with reproduction images, zooming slides, and sixty-second videos, but there are unavoidable gaps between objects. Two things explain the spaces. When Director Lonnie Bunch started hiring, ten years ago, his was the only Smithsonian museum that had no founding collection. Bunch used his prodigious abilities to seduce money, while curators bought, begged, and borrowed, bringing stuff together.

A second reason for the intermittent artifacts is that the paths of early black

Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

history are marked by breadcrumbs, not monuments. Material culture is scarcer. People banned from literacy and starved of wealth for centuries do not leave a white man's paper and machine trail.

But there are many amazing exceptions. Here is a Bible alleged to have belonged to Nat Turner, leader of the 1831 slave uprising in Virginia that killed some sixty whites. Nearby, there is a shawl and hymnal said to have been those of Harriet Tubman, conductor on the Underground Railroad, who freed hundreds. Such things pulled from the well of forgetting are like the possessions of martyrs. The "Hagerstown auction block," a rock about three feet square and two feet tall in a glass case, is a true executioner's stone. "Many African Americans, it is believed, were sold from this block," the understated wall text says. The provenance is not to be found on paper but from oral tradition; yet a thousand were no doubt broken here—and blessings on their memory.

The story slides from plot to subplot. The Civil War is shoehorned into five displays the size of shop windows. Then it is on to debt peonage... to Ku Klux Klan terror... and legal segregation. Every fifty feet comes another chapter: "The Black Church"... "The Battle Over Lynching" (a wall lists 2,210 named cases, and there is a piece of a lyncher's rope)... "The Great Migration"... "The New Negro, 1917–1945"... "Historically Black Colleges and Universities."

I spend some minutes with one poisonous collection, relics of Jim Crow swag: mammy salt shakers, Zip Coon puppets, ads for detergent with dancing pickaninnies. My grandparents had some of this stuff. On an adjacent wall, its antidote: lives of composer Scott Joplin, poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar, novelist Charles Chestnutt, and minstrel artists George Walker and Egbert Williams. Ida B. Wells, an activist who documented lynchings in the South and helped found the NAACP, gets a big room.

Halfway in, you are drained. Freelon Adjaye knew this would happen, and the designers have inserted a rest and recovery space, an interior court with a giant circular skylight and fountain of raining water.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, across the Washington Mall, recounts a disaster that spanned twelve years, 1933–1945. (Its exhibition design is by the same firm that gives us the NMAAHC, Ralph Appelbaum Associates, about whom more later.) The Holocaust story, as a narrative inside a history museum, moves with speed, inexorably, and ends with no redemption. Not so the black Smithsonian, which is twice as large as the Holocaust Museum and tells a four-hundred-year-long tale. The dilated chronology means you enter a black world and drift. It starts with trauma downstairs, but ends pretty well on the top floor.

The familiar gesture of the Smithsonian is to collect the big something with drama attached—a steam locomotive or a ticket booth from Yankee Stadium. The NMAAHC fits the pattern. Here are two entire houses (one of them a slave cabin), a 1944 Boeing biplane flown by one of the Tuskegee Airmen, a seventy-five-foot-long seg-

regated railroad car, the Angola prison tower, and, in a gallery about music, a 1973 Cadillac that belonged to Chuck Berry, plus, most happily, the "P-Funk Mothership," a stage prop like a spacecraft used during the 1980s by funk musician George Clinton. These are anchoring objects—pillars that halt the drift—and the giant black story clings to them.

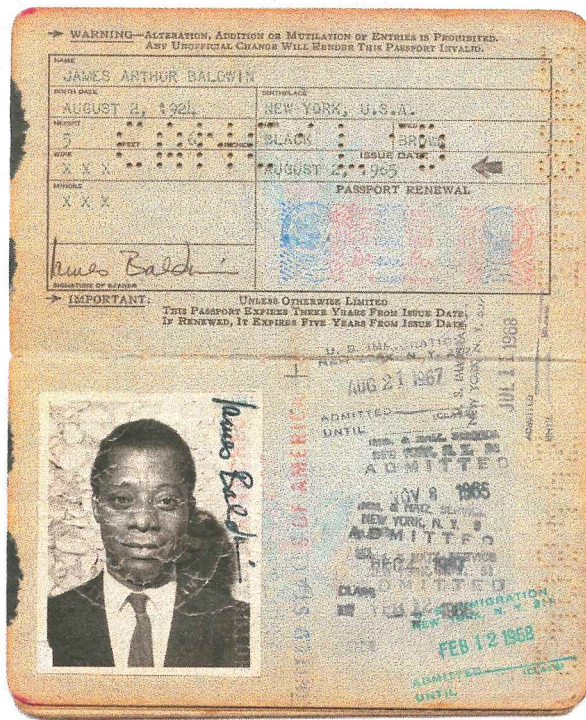
I leave the rehab court, enter the rooms about the civil rights movement, and come face-to-face with the casket of Emmett Till. He was the fourteen-year-old from Chicago tortured to death in Mississippi in 1955, whose murder fueled the movement. (Fifty years from now, will the museum have the casket of Trayvon Martin, or of Michael Brown of Ferguson, Missouri?) There is a dress that Rosa Parks was making at home the week she was arrested on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama; a tape recorder used by Malcolm X; a shotgun from the Deacons for Defense, a black militia in Louisiana and Mississippi during the 1960s; an ax handle belonging to Lester Maddox, governor of Georgia, which the swaggering supremacist swung in public like a cane. The civil rights galleries are a choir of stories with dozens of secondary voices. John Lewis is one, because he was in the thick of it. But then—something happens.

The chronology continues after the death of Martin Luther King in 1968, but there is a palpable shift in tone and sources. The narrative content and the displays themselves turn slowly, then increasingly, to popular culture. A gallery called "Black Power" takes all its imagery from the stream of news and entertainment. Clips from TV series are used to stand in for social life, black musicians jive on camera, and you see white newspapers absorb black subjects until, around the year 1980, the exhibits, along with the visitor, are surrendered to big media.

This is for better and for worse. For better, because the media cloudburst marks the passage of black life into the national white consciousness. For worse, because it means that literate storytelling, with artifacts and text, is going to be left behind. The culture of object and text is a withering arm on the body of public history. In their place you are swarmed by moving pictures and audio loops. Screens are everywhere, and most visitors look at them to the neglect of the artifacts.

At the top of the allegorical climb out of the basement come the Culture Galleries, where a dozen rooms blast with music, performance, and sports. The chronology disappears, the visitor is in the approximate present, and the feeling is that we now live in a society dominated by black expression. Here is a festival of black dance, spoken word, song, and clothes. The 6,500-square-foot music galleries reach from spirituals to Bessie Smith's blues, to Cab Calloway's big band, Donna Summer's disco, and Michael Jackson's moonwalk.

There is an audio section on language and the many ways that black people speak, and a video gallery that shows off black move-

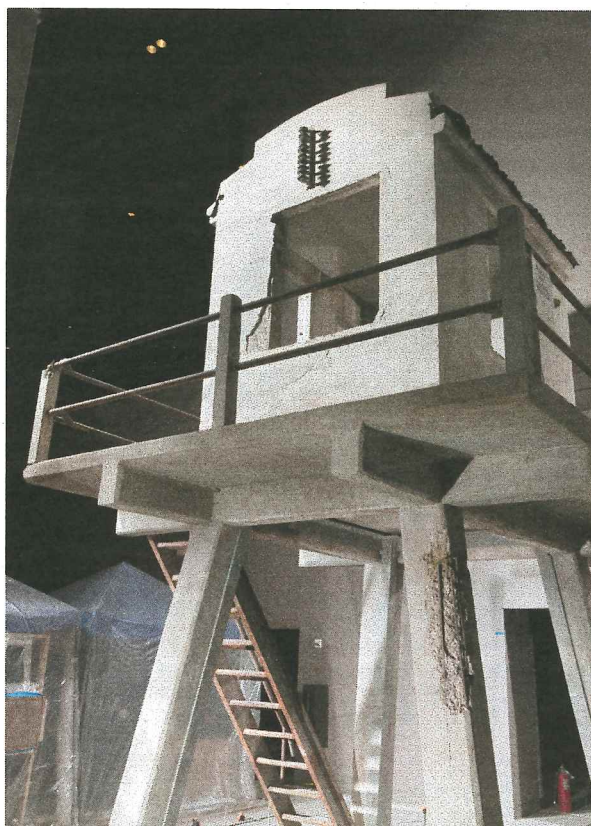


James Baldwin's passport, issued in 1965

ment and gesture, from the high-five to the side-eye stare to the fist bump. You have a "bass shaker" that vibrates the wooden floor as you watch music videos. The sports galleries, four thousand square feet, feature fan-worship, with vignettes about individual athletes, some of whom are still alive. There's occasional kitsch, including life-size fiberglass figures of athletes, like the tennis sisters Serena and Venus Williams. (People like black athletes, but do we need plastic statues?) Missing from the culture rooms is a gallery about food—though a lot of people like black food.

The museum culminates here, with four winds of feel-good creativity. It is a redemption, really. Although a less generous reading might be that the Negro is awfully good as an entertainer.

The 2010 census counts 42 million African-Americans, a number half the size of Germany, but only 13 percent of the US population. "When I tell Europeans that black people are 13 percent of Americans, they are surprised," says Melanie Ide, a principal at Ralph Appelbaum Associates (RAA), which



A twenty-one-foot-tall guard tower from Camp H at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, 1900–1950

designed the giant inaugural exhibition. "With the images and sounds out of America, they think blacks are the driving force."

RAA, founded in 1978, has designed dozens of culture centers, exhibitions, and history museums, from the Holocaust Memorial Museum to the NASCAR Hall of Fame, an entertainment attraction about car racing in Charlotte, North Carolina. The National Museum of African American History and Culture is the biggest single project it has undertaken. It was RAA that took the acquisitions of the museum's curators, assigned eighty-two designers, architects, historians, educators, media makers, and researchers to the project, and in six years shaped the hoard into a vast, rippling story, with subplots, reveals, visual pleasure, and catharsis.

Exhibition designers are the unacknowledged poets of public history. It is a three-dimensional art, and in a way subconscious in its effects, involving spatial arrangements, lighting, and stagecraft. The visitor may not pick up that the wall color changes from ox-blood red in the slavery galleries to gradually lighter colors until the walls are pale teal on the top floor.

"And each one of these areas or subjects could be a museum by itself," says Ralph Appelbaum, one of the firm's principals. "You could have a museum on jazz, or on civil rights, or on sports." He points gently to the problem built into the black Smithsonian. It wants to be some things to many people, all things to one people.

The firm is also the creator of the museum's pervasive use of media. "The music clips evoke the sound of America, and we show that African-Americans have been that sound," Appelbaum says. "The video answers the need to compress a lot of information. It is immersive, and lets the visitor enter African-American space. Also, as communications tools are absorbed by museums, they speak to segments of the audience who may not be text-oriented."

It is to cement a place of black centrality in the national mirror that this museum has been born. But the assignment is too big—those four hundred years, plus living culture. It can feel like a state-sponsored warehouse for blackness. Praise be for that. Yet the NMAAHC might have had more propulsion with a narrower focus. The nation does not have a museum of slavery, for instance. But I suspect that many black people do not want a museum of slavery. (Whites really do not want one.) What we apparently do want, and now have, is a place where the tragic story of black America is folded into a happy coda.

I wind my way back to the Angola guard tower, after six hours. Posing with the tower, people are taking selfies, which they stop to upload to the image stream, so that these, too, might join the media river. I look again at the concrete beast and wonder whether it stands in the past or in the celebratory present. The museum is good, it reaches for completeness, and it will be packed for years. □