

MEN OF COLOR

To Arms! To Arms! NOW OR NEVER

THREE YEARS' SERVICE!

AND JOIN IN FIGHTING THE

BATTLES OF LIBERTY AND THE UNION

FAIL NOW, & OUR RACE IS DOOMED

SILENCE THE TONGUE OF CALUMNY

VALOR AND COURAGE

PORT HUDSON

ARE FREEMEN

OUR LAST OP

MEN OF COLOR

WE APPRECIATE YOU!

STRIKE NOW!

Small text at the bottom of the poster, including names and dates, is mostly illegible due to the child's presence and the image resolution.

A young visitor inspects a graphically enlarged iconic Civil War broadside.

National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution

Washington, DC

David Taft Terry, PhD

A critique is a writer's professional and personal assessment of an exhibition, formed without consulting its creators, and shaped by his or her expertise and experience. Its audience is the profession. Each issue of the journal features a critique of a current or recent exhibition.

I grew up in the late 20th century, as a third-generation, native Washingtonian. Like most Washingtonians, thanks to proximity and ready access, the otherwise “national” museums of the Smithsonian Institution were regarded as “community” entities all the same. That said, on the rare occasions my parents took my brother and me downtown from our working-class black enclave in the suburbs to visit the National Mall, we chose the National Air and Space Museum, or the National Museum of Natural History (or sometimes we went uptown to the zoo). Never the National Museum of American History, or any of the visual art museums. My parents' quite perceptive position was that the museums of the Smithsonian might be wonderful places, but they were not principally interested in us – our history, our culture, or our contributions to the national life. As such, my parents found other ways to impart *our* heritage.

Later, in college, I came to perceive the Smithsonian differently – largely, perhaps, as I have since come to understand, because it was around that time that it had begun to perceive those like me differently. I went to school locally, to the University of Maryland at College Park, in the Washington DC suburbs. During my freshman year (1987), I accompanied a classmate to the National Mall, and stumbled across *Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration, 1915–1940* at the National Museum of American History. A “temporary exhibition” that refused to be closed, it quite literally helped me determine the path of my future professional life. I came to understand that I wanted to be an historian of the black experience, and even a museum professional, in large part from what was revealed to me in that small exhibition. I went back time and again to explore *Field to Factory* over its nearly 20-year run. I only regret that I never took my parents.

Within such context, I write here from three voices about the exhibitions of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), which opened to great fanfare on the National Mall in 2016. The first of these voices speaks as a middle-aged, native, black Washingtonian who holds a personal history with the Smithsonian. A second voice is informed by my time as a museum professional, including a number of years at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture, among other stops. And finally, an academic historian's voice can be heard from my role on the faculty at Morgan State University.

According to the museum's website, NMAAHC's collections hold more than 36,000 artifacts. The building itself measures some 350,000 square feet of total space, spread across 10 stories (five above ground, five below). Fully half of this enormous area appears to be



dedicated to gallery space. The permanent exhibition programs at NMAAHC encompass three spaces: the History Galleries, the Community Gallery, and the Culture Gallery. The History Galleries provide visitors with the grand, chronological sweep of the African American experience. Pulling from that broadest perspective, the Community Gallery dives deeper into selected institutional modes, organizational topics, and categories of community life. Meanwhile, with interpretation of black cultural history absent elsewhere in the permanent exhibition program, the Culture Gallery seems uniquely necessary and rewarding.

The space limitations of this critique do not afford any comprehensive description of the objects on view. I will, however, mention a few pieces that I found particularly powerful. I will also testify to a few of the many poignant moments I observed (and eavesdropped on) as an eager public engaged with the objects and other elements of NMAAHC's installations.

The History Galleries

In terms of layout and design, the History Galleries are three contiguous exhibitions. The main themes pursued throughout these galleries tell of the perseverance and resistance that has always been a foundation of ordinary black life. In pursuit of these themes, the luminaries of this history – from

the 18th-century writer Gustavus Vassa, to the 19th-century rebel Harriet Tubman Davis, to the 20th-century activist-educator Mary McLeod Bethune, to the 21st-century American president Barack Hussein Obama – are contextualized as products of black America, and the African American historical trajectory.

The first of the History Galleries' exhibitions, *Slavery and Freedom 1400–1877*, begins in 15th-century Africa and proceeds to interpret the markers of African American history: the transatlantic slave trade; the impact of the Revolutionary War and the nation's founding on black life; the expansion of U.S. slavery during the antebellum era; and the age of Civil War and Emancipation. Among what seems to be the hundreds of objects on view in this gallery is a small, well-worn and stained, pocket-sized Holy Bible that once belonged to the African American liberator, Nat Turner. Of greater scale, but with seemingly no less effect, is an oversized recreation of the now-famous Civil War recruiting broadside, "Men of Color To Arms! To Arms!" which caused a young boy to linger long enough to read and reread every word while I was nearby ([intro image](#)).

From there, wayfinders direct museumgoers up to the next level (via a ramp) and the next exhibition in the History Galleries, *Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom: The Era of Segregation*

1876–1968. The museum's website states that this exhibition "looks at how the nation was changed as a consequence of [African American] struggles and emerged from them more in sync with its pronouncements about freedom, equality, and democracy." Toward such an end, *Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom* divides the history of Jim Crow along familiar breaks: the rise of legally mandated racial segregation in the South during the late 19th and early 20th centuries; the black demographic shift of "the Great Migration"; and the culmination of the "modern" civil rights movement. The story is complex. Yet if there is a criticism to be leveled here against *Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom*, it is that its interpretation of the Jim Crow years is largely uncomplicated by the intra-community discourse whereby African Americans debated the best paths forward at any given historical moment.

This mild complaint notwithstanding, the objects on view in *Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom* are powerful. They range from examples of the disfigured affront on black dignity as intended by the ubiquitous "coon" and "mammy" aesthetic of the turn of the 20th century, to artifacts of black self-determination and black defiance during the "New Negro" years. Of this latter variety, the somewhat ostentatious pomp and circumstance of Pan Africanist Marcus Garvey's bicorne martial hat (*sans plume*) is on view here ([fig. 1](#)).



fig. 1.
Marcus Garvey's
signature bicorne
military hat.

It is also notable that the design and layout of *Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom* provides artful communication between objects within the space. As I toured the exhibition, for example, at a coincidental moment of pause, I took in the “Modern Civil Rights Movement” installations mediated by a view *through* casework containing a 1950s-era television studio camera. I felt I had stumbled across an intended if subtle brilliance; in the 21st century, it is hard to imagine social justice activism without audiovisual media. This felt like a purposeful juxtaposition and genuflection – at least in my mind – to the moment of the historical marriage between “live” media and protest activism.

Rising to the third level (though still very much underground in

relation to street level), visitors enter the final exhibition of the History Galleries, *A Changing America: 1968 and Beyond*. As the museum’s website notes, “[this exhibition] considers the challenges faced by African Americans...as they continue to fight for racial equity and social justice, issues as relevant to the 21st century as to the 20th.” After the catch-all space “Events of ’68,” *A Changing America* conveys the fundamental shifts wrought by the rise to visibility of cultural, economic, and political “black power” (fig. 2).

Perhaps reflecting the greater diversity of these “modern” African American experiences, if nearly everything in *A Changing America* worked well, it is only fair to say all did not. For example, “Cities and

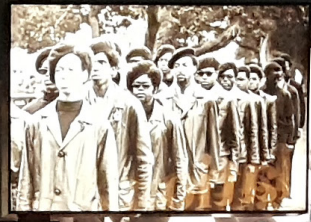
Suburbs” was an important and affecting installation that explored the paradox of an expanding black middle class and a durable black underclass in the post-civil rights years. Yet it seemed out of thematic step with the rest of the exhibition. The designers had shunted the installation into an almost inaccessible corner, where it was no doubt easily missed by many visitors.

Meanwhile – assured by its placement near the end of the exhibition – there was an installation surely not to be missed, titled “President Barack H. Obama.” On the afternoon of my visit, I witnessed the exuberant and rather satisfied exchanges of a group of visitors taking in the Obama artifacts. From what I overheard, they saw this –



fig. 2. Black Power installation.

Black Power



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ahneh and
ot foreign
power...
of Justice
ays will b
ccorda
ill e
ER
1971

Black
Power
Party

Black Power
self-determination
Black Nationalism
Human Rights
organizing
movement
over 100





the first black man to be elected President of the United States, contextualized against all else they had already seen – not as the end of the story, but simply another historical turn to be given its moment of reflection.

From there, visitors quickly find themselves back in the early 21st century as the History Galleries end. Taken together – as they are no doubt intended, in evidence by the fact that one can only enter at “the beginning” or exit at “the end” – there is a visceral experience as one progresses through the galleries: climbing ramps from the lower level to the next, literally making the turn from slavery to freedom, and then later from freedom to

equality. Resting and reflecting spaces are made available to visitors at each “turn.” Oral history interactives called “The Reflection Booth[s]” invite you to “record your thoughts about African American history and culture.” A series of video prompts guide visitor-respondents through the process. And with their permission, the recordings collected become eligible for use in the gallery or on NMAAHC’s web platforms. Likewise, as visitors transition between the exhibitions of the History Galleries, they can choose to sit, rest, and take in brief orientation films to prepare them for the next gallery’s journey by generally reviewing the broad themes of the previous gallery, and previewing the themes of the next.

The Community and Culture Galleries

Beyond the History Galleries, the NMAAHC’s permanent exhibition program is completed by the Community Gallery and the Culture Gallery, respectively. Retracing some of the same chronological ground as the History Galleries, the Community Gallery, for example, offers a more thematic, focused interpretation on the internal dynamics of black America historically, particularly for African Americans as a group under Jim Crow. It also features individual black achievement in selected fields during segregation and beyond.

fig. 3. Double Victory casework.



There are four separate exhibitions in the Community Gallery, all installed in overlapping proximity: *Double Victory: the African American Military Experience*; *Sports: Leveling the Playing Field*; *Making a Way Out of No Way* (an exploration of a variety of Jim Crow-era organizational and institutional histories); and *The Power of Place* (the historical variety of communities and identities). Taken together, as with the History Galleries' external perspectives on blacks' social, political, and economic relationships with other Americans across the long arc of history, the internal historical views interpreted in the Community Gallery constitute a progress story – not an unbroken one, however, as gains came in fits and starts (fig. 3).

On the fifth and last publicly accessible floor of the NMAAHC experience is the Culture Gallery. Here, the mood quickly and easily shifts from a sometimes solemn, humbled, and quiet appreciation to almost giddy, infectious fun! Exhibitions explore and celebrate the sustaining rhythms and indomitable aesthetic of the African American experience. Entering the gallery space, visitors are inescapably confronted with the energy and vivacity of black dance and spoken-word traditions in *Cultural Expressions*.

Going deeper into the space – past rock 'n roll pioneer Chuck Berry's red Cadillac convertible – visitors in my cohort stayed a long time in *Musical Crossroads*,

a deep immersion into black music history. As a child of the '70s and '80s, I must confess my own smile grew broadest when I came to “the Mothership” (fig. 4), the shiny, blinking, gaudy Afro-futurist stage prop from the legendary R&B/Funk band, Parliament-Funkadelic (“Make my funk a P-Funk, I wants to get funky up!”). Also in the Culture Gallery, *Taking the Stage* conveys a long and nuanced history of blacks in theater, while a small exhibition, *Visual Art in the American Experience*, delves into the world of black contemporary art.



fig. 4. “The Mothership,” a 1970s stage prop for the legendary band Parliament-Funkadelic.



fig. 5. The National Museum of African American History and Culture.



Reflections

Moving through the galleries at NMAAHC one can easily glean that many of the challenges of the past remain. Yet, as racism, hate, and bigotry endure, they are not as before. More diverse voices than ever speak together against them. In that mind, I am left only to hope and imagine that for the millions of visitors who will come here each year, this excellent museum (fig. 5) might one day be allowed to be just an excellent museum. For now, however – and into the foreseeable near future at least – the National Museum of African American History and Culture has to be more. It has to be an intervention of historical truth.

Fortunately for all of us, it is exactly this already, and its power in this way has also already been made self-evident, if only by the enemies of truth. In late May 2017, someone placed a hangman's noose – a horrific and historic symbol of racist violence against African Americans – in one of the galleries. No doubt intended as an attempt to intimidate, this depraved action instead amounted to an admission of fear of the power in NMAAHC's historical truths. Perhaps had the perpetrator spent a little more time in these galleries, they might have realized that black America is no longer afraid – if it *ever* truly was. The power of this place is evident. This is a triumph. This is a

beautiful thing. I can't wait to bring my mother.

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