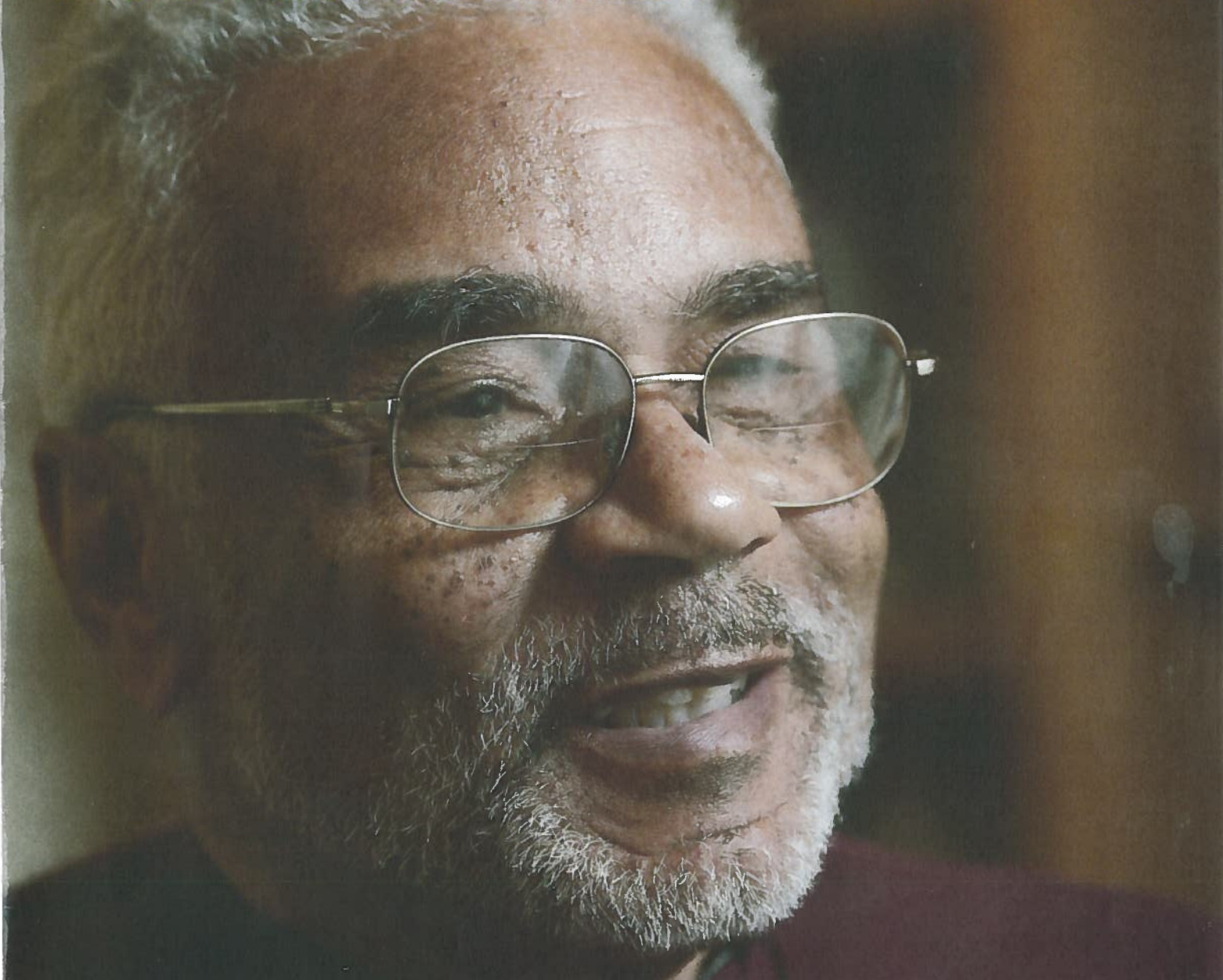


CELEBRATING BLACK HISTORY MONTH

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SAFEGUARDING HISTORY

Dr. Clayborne Carson, a professor of history and director of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute at Stanford University, has made it his mission to educate the public on the life and work of the slain civil rights leader.

Making History

Dr. Greg E. Carr, associate professor and chair of African American Studies at Howard University, reflects on the historical, emotional impact of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

If you are fortunate enough to have the chance to visit the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), let go of any ambition to take it all in one go. There is simply too much to see and absorb in one viewing.

Tickets are booked out months in advance for 2017; the crowds of visitors underscoring the importance of this museum. After decades of planning, the Black experience is finally elevated to its rightful place on the National Mall. America was built on the backs of its enslaved population, and this building is their monument and a centuries-overdue testament to their labors.

The museum is arranged chronologically, starting below ground with the early history of the slave trade and winding through history to the contemporary moment, illustrating how central African-Americans have been to the success of the American enterprise from the very beginning. Upper floors are dedicated to arts, music and culture.

Given the vastness and complexity of the ground the museum covers, curators had to be deft in how they made the most of the space. Yet, they succeeded in honoring both the heroes of the African-American experience and those who were written out of history.

In amassing the collection of some 35,000 objects, museum curators acquired genuine treasures, such as Nat Turner's Bible and Harriet Tubman's delicate lace shawl and hymnal. Material objects alone, however, would not tell the full story.

Instead, it is the way the museum arrays these objects that expresses the full tragedy of slavery and the essential dignity and resilience of the human spirit. It is in the juxtaposition of object, image and text that the story is told.

In one section of the museum, metal shackles hang over a wooden cradle built by slaves, illustrating both the waste of human potential and the care and love they gave to their children. In another, a casting of a 12th century African bust looks out stoically beneath the cat o' nine tails, while accompanying text informs the viewer that the average life expectancy of a slave laboring in the rice and sugar plantations was seven years.

Achievement in the face of extreme adversity is the central tenet of the museum and its core message. Yet, as the sections of the museum dedicated to moments in history such as the Reconstruction era, Emmett Till's death, and the Civil Rights struggle show, the museum also serves as a reminder that, for every step forward, there is too often a step back.

We asked Dr. Greg E. Carr, associate professor of Africana Studies and chair of the Department of Afro-American Studies at Howard University, to share his reflections on the museum as a prominent historian of the African diaspora. ▣

— Catherine Morris

By Dr. Greg E. Carr

I was afforded the honor of writing a small piece on the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) for *Ebony* magazine. I attended the ceremonial opening (and the indescribably powerful three-day "Freedom Sounds" concert across the street). Beyond that, however, I have refused from my friends who work there any enhanced access to the museum, preferring to use my advantage as a local resident to compete with everyone else for "day-of" tickets to enter and spend full days moving through this remarkable, constantly shifting, convening and curating of Black objects and humanity. I remain convinced that the meaning of the museum will shift with every change in America's social, cultural and economic fortunes and fabric.

The single most moving feeling the NMAAHC evokes comes from observing the perpetual curation of people who come to see its treasures. If only running transcripts could be published of the electric intergenerational conversations between elders in wheelchairs or walking sticks and seas of children, from little boys on the shoulders of their fathers, uncles and brothers to little girls walking alongside their mothers, sisters and cousins. If only an army of photographers could capture and project nightly on its bronze facade the reverence, excitement, anger, joy and deep contemplation in the faces and body language of visitors clustering at its exhibits.

NMAAHC aspires to something both noble and impossible: To narrate American history through an African-American lens. The aspiration reveals the absurdity of its contradiction: The evisceration of America's native population and the enslavement of Africans make for an irreconcilable American past.

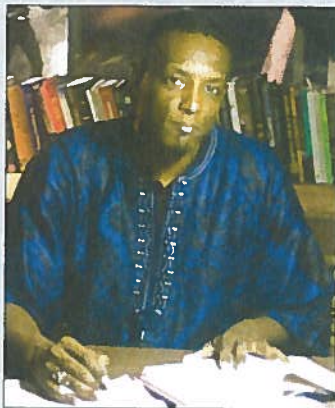
The Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) embraces that irreconcilability, using it to deliberately convene a hemisphere-wide expansiveness that raises more questions than it attempts to answer. It boldly invites visitors to do the same. In contrast, the "Blacksonian," as some have begun to call the NMAAHC, gestures toward our literal African foundations before trying to pour our global humanity into a narrow American vessel. In so doing, however (especially in the top floors where the arts render such containers laughably meaningless), it still manages to evoke the same open-ended questioning, albeit in a more circuitous fashion.

African experiences in this settler state cannot be contained in one building or one narrative. Narrating Black objects in one space is made all the more daunting when one considers that every other museum in the Smithsonian family contains frag-

ments of Africana. The mere act of creating the NMAAHC rivals every other museum except the NMAI, the African Art Museum and the Anacostia Community Museum as a curation of the national narratives of settler colonialism and whiteness. What the NMAAHC has done by convening objects at critical mass is really to have created a shrine. And shrines are powerful in ways that we dare not speak when trying to coexist in plain sight with a country that has yet to come to grips with our permanent presence.



Joseph Field's Farm exhibition in the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture on September 21, 2016 in Washington, DC.



Dr. Greg E. Carr is an associate professor and chair of Afro-American Studies at Howard University.

Much of the value and power of the museum is to be found in its minutiae. The more history visitors know, the more powerful small things become, from copies of "Black World" or Broadside Press publications to the piano from August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*. There are centers of power strewn through the museum, pockets that trigger deep Black feelings, what James Spady used to call "Way Black Memories." A rifle from the Deacons for Defense. The "neighborhood record store" in the corner of the top floor. The mock Negro Leagues baseball stadium, complete with stadium seating. Bricks from the first buildings at Howard and Hampton Universities. A corner that combines the images and voices of Ira Aldridge, Bert Williams and Paul Robeson is a testament to the ironies of performing Blackness that moved me, an old theater major and one-time actor, to tears.

But, there is no more powerful spirit centered in that shrine building than the room that holds Emmitt Till's casket. Sit on the little wooden church pew and observe the line of visitors-turned-funeral goers. Listen to Mahalia Jackson sing. Watch them take off hats and shush their children. Observe security guards unconsciously assume the vocal tone and hand gestures of church ushers.

Go to our national museum as many times as you can. I know I will. When I am finally able, I will write more fully of the place. I assure everyone that it will be different every time you come. It is a shrine. Our ancestors are there. We owe them a blood debt. They have something different to tell us every time, if we have the courage to listen. ▣