

Take a Tour of the New

Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

with B-town's Gladys DeVane and Liz Mitchell

2017

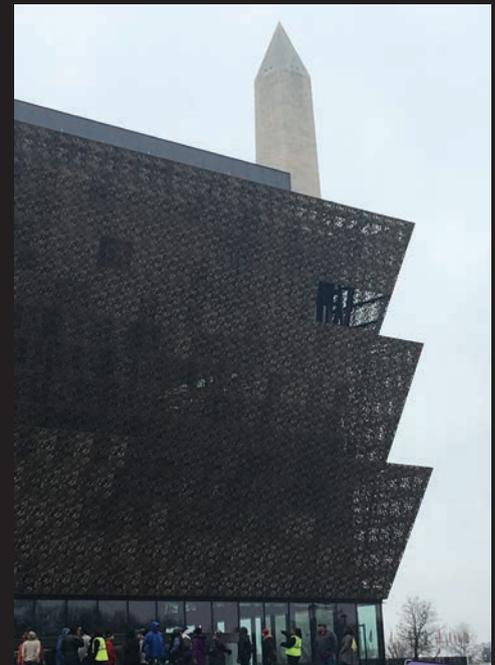
As we stepped from the taxi and stared up at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the massive bronze structure with its rough texture appeared like the hull of a great ship. Three small windows high on the wall resembled portholes. I imagined it to be a monstrously large slave ship, loaded with human cargo, and bound for America's shores.

This Smithsonian Institution museum, located at 1400 Constitution Avenue NW in Washington, D.C., sits directly across from the Washington Monument, a memorial dedicated to this country's first president, a man who himself owned slaves. What a paradox! These two structures — a monument to independence and a monument depicting the struggles of an enslaved people — juxtaposed and sharing the skyline in our nation's capitol. Perhaps we are finally ready to tell the whole story.

We entered the museum through Heritage Hall, an enormous atrium that includes a welcome desk where visitors can obtain information about the collections and the layout of the museum. The atrium was bustling with people of all ages and ethnicities; it is the gathering place at the beginning and end of the museum experience.

(opposite page, clockwise from top left) Gladys DeVane (left) and Elizabeth Mitchell outside the new National Museum of African American History and Culture; Gladys and Liz admire a bust of Phillis Wheatley, the first African American woman to publish a book of poetry in the United States; the museum is a time capsule of African American history, from its earliest beginnings to the present day.

(right) The Washington Monument can be seen just behind the imposing, ship-like structure of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.



C3 — Lowest Level: Slavery and Freedom 1400–1877

C3 can be accessed only by means of one large, glass-walled elevator. As it begins its descent, the year 1968, painted in 3-foot-tall white numbers, appears on the outside wall. As the elevator makes its downward progression, so do the years: 1958, 1865, 1775 — until we reach the year 1400, where the elevator stops and the doors open.

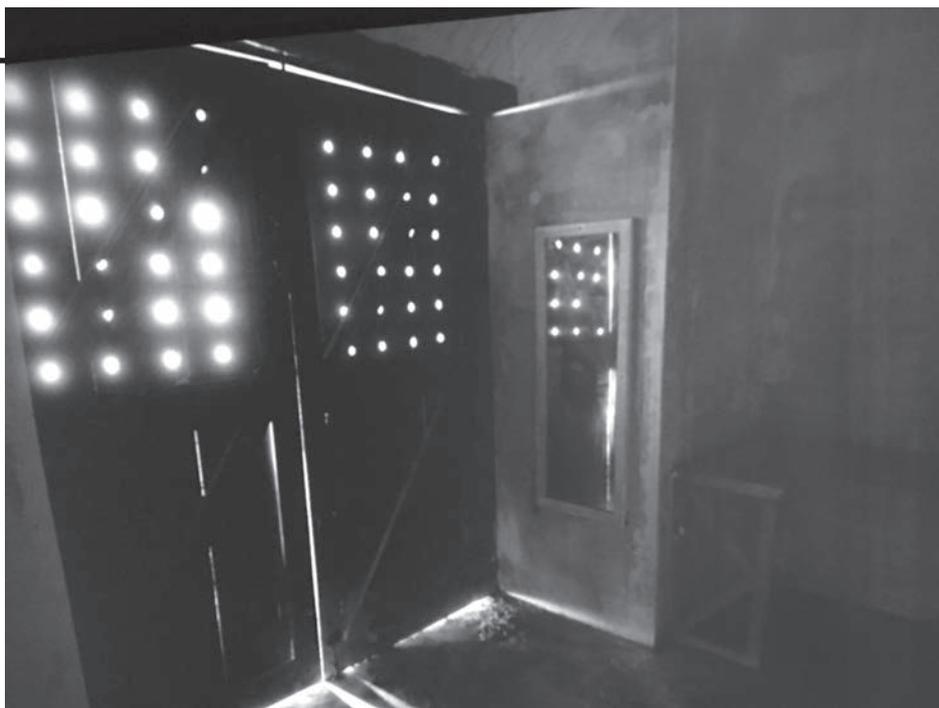
We stepped into a dimly lit corridor and, almost immediately, ominous feelings washed over us.

We had been told by the attendant, “This level represents the darkness of oppression: the time period from slavery to freedom.” Subsequent exhibits on C2 and C1 explore the trials, struggles, and suffering of a free people striving to carve out a meaningful life but determined to hold America to her promise of “freedom and justice for all.”

Our reactions to C3 varied from hopelessness and despair to resentment, disgust, and anger. We learned from talking with other visitors, both black and white, that they shared similar feelings.

The most haunting exhibit was “The Doors of No Return.” Like our forefathers, we were made to feel as though we stood at the threshold of those terrible doors. They led from slave-holding stations all along the African coast to docked ships waiting for their human cargo. The stations were referred to as castles because of their fortress-like architecture. The images of the opened doors leading to the corridors through which humans were herded like animals to board waiting ships; the sounds and visual images of ocean waves splashing against the rocks along the shore; the realization that a walk through those doors represented permanent separation from one’s family and homeland. It all created a horrible, eerie feeling. It also made us realize the extent of the irreparable damage that was perpetrated on African nations by the purchase of their people like a disposable commodity. As we stood listening to the haunting sounds of the ocean waves, we felt a sense of anxiety, despair, and hopelessness.

I imagined the thousands of men, women, and children, all in a state of bewilderment, who passed through those doors,



bound together by ropes and chains, headed for unknown lands.

Two other exhibits on C3 were equally disturbing: one, a huge limestone boulder called *On the Block*, and a second exhibit, a small bag bearing the title *Ashley’s Sack*.

On The Block: A plaque read, “The auction block was a sight of fear, humiliation, and uncertainty where loved ones were separated for life.” As Liz and I stood there viewing *The Block*, we could hear the recorded voices of former slaves who had been sold or whose loved ones were sold, telling their stories of separation:

“They stripped her naked to bid on and look at her. Mama and Liza both cried when she was being showed off.”

(top) The Doors of No Return. (bottom, left) Illustration of how slaves were confined to ships for transport. (bottom, right) Slave shackles.

(opposite page, top) Ashley’s Sack with the embroidered words describing its history and significance. (opposite, bottom) This stone slave auction block from Maryland bears a plaque with the inscription, “General Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay spoke from this slave block in Hagerstown during the year 1830.”

My great grandmother Rose
 mother of Ashley gave her this sack when
 she was sold at age 9 in South Carolina
 it held a tattered dress 3 handfuls of
 pecans a braid of Rosess hair Told her
 It be filled with my Love always
 she never saw her again
 Ashley is my grandmother
 Ruth Middleton
 1921

"Mama begged Master not to separate us ... and she hugged Mary and Jane. ... And they come up and pulled them way from Mama. The traders in them days didn't think no more of taking a child away from his mama than taking a little calf away from a cow."

"I had a brother Jim, he was sold to get a dress for the Missy's wedding. And I set there and cried and cried, especially when they put him in chains. ... I ain't never felt so lonesome."

"I can see that old block now. My cousin Liza was a pretty girl... real good lookin' ... Master was fond of her, too. When the girls in the Big House had beaus coming to see'em ... they'd [the beaus] ask, 'Who is that pretty girl?' So they decided to get rid of her [Liza]. The day they sold her will always be remembered."

These are true stories that were recorded by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). They evoked a deep visceral feeling that was draining. But these stories should be heard. They are stories that we must never forget.

Ashley's Sack: This exhibit depicts the story of Ashley, a 9-year-old girl, who was sold away from Middleton Place plantation in Dorchester County, South Carolina. Ashley's slave mother, Rose, gave her the sack, saying, "This sack is filled with my love." In it were a tattered dress, three handfuls of pecans, and a lock of her mother's hair. Ashley never saw her mother again. In 1921, Ruth Middleton, Ashley's granddaughter, embroidered the story on the sack, including Rose's parting words to her daughter: "It be filled with my love always."

These two exhibits are a testament to the cruel, heartless, and inhumane practices of slavery.

The unequivocal link between the slave trade and our country's economy was a recurring theme throughout the C3 exhibits. The facts are there and cannot be denied. Slavery was the engine that drove the cotton, rice, tobacco, sugar, and indigo industries, and a large segment of the population did everything in its power to maintain this engine. We were a country whose morality was based on and governed by making financial profit. To a great extent, I believe, this is still true today.



C2 — Second Level: Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom: The Era of Segregation 1876–1968

Ascending from the oppression of slavery, we moved to the C2 level and exhibits that covered Reconstruction, the demise of Reconstruction, and Jim Crow.

The first few years following the Civil War ushered in the era of Reconstruction, a period in which many Southern African Americans gained civil and political rights, and were appointed and elected to positions of prestige and responsibility. However, these advances were short-lived because of the demands the white citizenry put on the Confederate states. The Supreme Court began to systematically chip away at the gains made by African Americans.

Black leaders tried desperately to hold the country accountable to its promise of freedom, justice, and equality. Many African American leaders spoke eloquently regarding the obligation of the federal and state governments to honor their promises.

“America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future.” —Frederick Douglass

“The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.” —Ida B. Wells

“I am earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—and I will be heard.” —William Lloyd Garrison



After reading their quotations and seeing the images of courageous men and women, many of them unsung heroes, I experienced an immense sense of pride and respect for them. The risks they took to battle segregation and Jim Crow — a seemingly insurmountable task — creates a sense of dignity and self-worth, especially for the African American museum visitor, in spite of all the negativity on display from the Jim Crow era.

By far the most powerful and disturbing exhibit on C2 told the story of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American boy from Chicago, who was visiting a relative in Mississippi in 1955 when he was kidnapped and murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Till was beaten unmercifully, his head smashed, and, when found, one eyeball was dangling from its socket. When his mother, Mamie Till, was asked by the attending mortician, “Do you want us to try to fix his face?” Mamie responded, “No, let the people see what I see. I think everybody needs to know what happened to Emmett Till.” The men accused of the brutal murder were acquitted by an all-white jury.

Emmett Till’s casket is on display in the exhibit along with a series of photographs taken at his funeral. A life-size picture of Emmett’s mother stands at the head of the casket. She is weeping, her face contorted in anguish. Walking into the exhibit feels like entering the actual funeral service. The lighting is dim, the crowd moves slowly through the room in single file, passing the open casket. No one is allowed to take photographs.

(above) Emmett Till and his mother, Mamie. Emmett was just 14 when he was kidnapped and murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman.

(opposite page, top) After the Civil War, Southern states passed Black Codes to restrict the freedoms of newly emancipated African Americans.

(opposite page, bottom) As early as Reconstruction, the Supreme Court began to chip away at the rights granted to every American by the Constitution.

Black Codes

After the Civil War the former Confederate States passed laws intended to restrict the rights of African Americans. These “black codes” punished vagrancy, forced freedmen to sign labor contracts, and blocked their right to vote. Violators were subject to arrest, and the labor of prisoners was auctioned off to the highest bidder. In the end black codes created an oppressive system of customs and laws intended to tightly restrict the civic and economic rights of African Americans.

LOUISIANA

Every negro is required to be in the regular service of some white person, or former owner, who shall be held responsible for the conduct of said negro. But said employer or former owner may permit said negro to hire his own time by special permission in writing, which permission shall not extend over seven days at any one time.

MISSISSIPPI

If any freedman, free negro, or mulatto, convicted of any of the misdemeanors provided against in this act, shall fail or refuse for the space of five days, after conviction, to pay the fine and costs imposed, such person shall be hired out by the sheriff or other officer, at public outcry, to any white person who will pay said fine and all costs, and take said convict for the shortest time.

SOUTH CAROLINA

No person of color shall migrate into and reside in this state, unless, within twenty days after his arrival within the same, he shall enter into a bond with two freeholders as sureties.

FLORIDA

When a person of color working on a farm or plantation deliberately disobeys orders, is impudent or disrespectful to his employer, refuses to do the work assigned, or leaves the premises, he can be arrested.

NORTH CAROLINA

No person of color can testify against a white person in court, unless the white person agrees to it.

TEXAS

Only white men can serve on juries, hold office, and vote in any state, county, or municipal election.

TENNESSEE

No colored persons have the right to vote, hold office or sit on juries in this state.

Mahalia Jackson is heard singing “Soon I will be done with the troubles of this world. ... I’m going home to live with my Lord.”

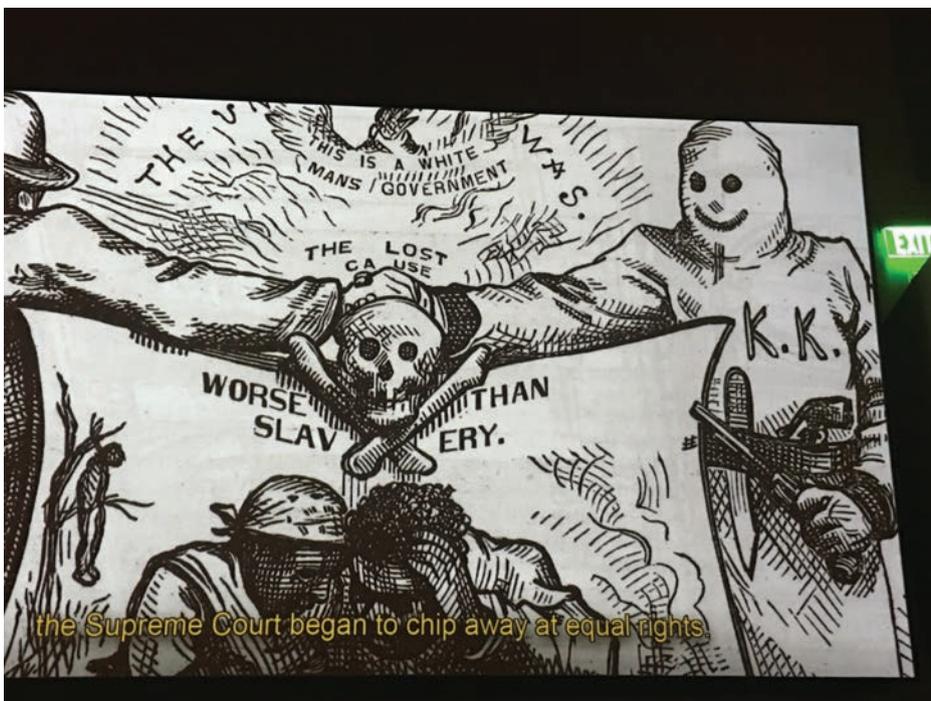
Along one wall is a gigantic panoramic photograph of the actual funeral service showing hundreds of mourners. On the opposite wall is a picture of the graveside service with the dressed casket about to be lowered into the ground.

Upon reaching this station, I became so emotional that I had to abruptly leave the exhibit. I found a place where I could sit quietly and regain my composure before continuing. Liz had a similar reaction. She said to me later, “Segregation hurts, the memories of it are painful. The vision of Emmett Till’s casket and the funeral setting ripped my soul and hurt to the core. It was a strong and powerful exhibit which caused sensory overload.”

The C2 exhibits evoked painful memories. Having spent the first 10 years of my life in Texas, and having lived in Oklahoma from 1949 until 1963, I have first-hand experience of overt segregation, discrimination, and Jim Crow, including signs that read “No Niggers, No Mexicans, No Dogs,” “Rear Seats for Coloreds,” “Whites Only,” and “Nigger, don’t let sundown catch you in this town.” Having been a part of the initial Oklahoma City NAACP Youth Council movement to integrate the Katz Drug Store lunch counter and the John A. Brown Department Store Lunch and Tea Room in downtown Oklahoma City during the late 1950s, these exhibits aroused in me feelings of resentment, hostility, and anger.

The movement to integrate lunch counters and other public places in Oklahoma City and surrounding cities was similar to the highly publicized sit-ins that took place in 1961 in North Carolina.

Liz, who grew up in Indianapolis, had this to say: “These exhibits aroused memories of covert discrimination. In Indianapolis, we African Americans knew the places that we could and could not go, and we didn’t! There were unwritten rules, but we knew them.” Liz recalls a sign at Riverside Amusement Park that read “Whites Preferred.” She says, “It was there, it just was not as overt.”



the Supreme Court began to chip away at equal rights.

C1 — Third Level: A Changing America: 1968 and Beyond

We ascended upward from segregation to exhibits that told stories of the continuing African American struggle for true freedom, real justice, and uncompromised equality.

Perhaps most depressing to me was the realization that the struggles that ignited yesterday's Black Power Movement are the same struggles that have led to today's Black Lives Matter movement — police brutality, the practice of unequal justice within the legal system, and the lack of educational and economic opportunities.

Because some people seem offended by the Black Lives Matter movement and respond to it by saying “all lives matter,” we asked a number of white patrons at the museum, “Do you understand the necessity of the Black Lives Matter movement?” The unanimous response was, “I understand” and “I get it!” Richard Eisinger, a middle-aged white man, had this to say: “I absolutely understand. All one has to do is look at the statistics, which describe what's happening to African Americans. The discrepancies are so real. It didn't seem to me to be like that 30 years ago. We've turned backward in this country.”

The realization that African Americans, as a people, have made monumental political and social gains, yet so many continue to languish in poverty, unable to access adequate health care or equal job opportunities, causes me to wonder: Are we dealing with the same old bigotry repackaged? Are the founding principles of the Ku Klux Klan, white supremacists groups, and the White Citizens' Councils so deeply entrenched in white America that their dogmata continue to prevail? If so, that would explain why we find ourselves again battling to preserve voting rights, fighting for fairness in the judicial system, and struggling for political and economic equality. These were my thoughts as I made my way through the maze of C1 exhibits.

At C1, however, some of the exhibits portrayed images and life-sized panels of young black men and women speaking eloquently and honestly, sharing their feelings and thoughts regarding their place in this changing world. These are today's



The atrium and welcome center at the entrance of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

young professionals — activists, educators, entertainers, clergy, and parents — sharing their hopes and visions of a future America free from bigotry and hate. They are our torchbearers, lighting the way to the future. They will continue the struggle to ensure that the gains made by their ancestors will not be lost. These images and narratives were inspiring and uplifting.

As we completed the C1 exhibits, an attendant said, “Don't miss the John Hope Franklin Room.” This room contained an enormous circular waterfall cascading from the ceiling to a pool below, the perfect place to sit, contemplate, and meditate. Each wall of this room contains a quotation by a different African or African American, including Nelson Mandela, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Sam Cooke.

The maze of C1-level exhibits eventually led us back to Heritage Hall, the main L1 level, where we took a break to reflect on what we had seen and heard, and to prepare for what was to come. We took the escalator to L2, and as it slowly moved upward, we were surrounded by large windows protected from the outside by bronze corona panels covering the exterior of the building. These lattice-like panels allow sunlight to fill the room. They create an open, airy feeling, a mood of lightness and joy, completely dissipating the heavy, dark mood of floors C3–C1.

We continued our exploration of the upper levels. L2: Explore More; L3: Community Galleries; and L4: Culture Galleries. These

galleries cover a wide range of subject matter presented as displays and on interactive media screens. They represent the raising up of an oppressed people and their extraordinary accomplishments in every area of human pursuit.

L2: Explore More consists of three small exhibition rooms around the perimeter of a larger central room. The first of the smaller enclosed rooms has exhibits designed to encourage visitors to explore their personal family histories, the second has an exhibit of African American media arts, and the third has an impressive library of rare books by African American authors. The collection includes Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem “Howdy, Honey, Howdy” and his book *Poems of Cabin and Field* (1899), Sarah Hopkins Bradford's book *Harriet, the Moses of Her People* (1886), and books written by Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and other noted leaders, educators, and activists. Access to this library is by appointment only, so we could only admire them from the outside.

In the center of L2 there is an interactive learning exhibit consisting of a large touchscreen that provides pictures and descriptions of every artifact in the museum. There is also an interactive tribute to the *Negro Motorist Green Book*, a travel guide published from 1936 to 1966, which helped guide African Americans as they traveled across the United States. It provided information regarding restaurants and lodging available for African Americans, since

Jim Crow laws prohibited access to many establishments. A third interactive exhibit provides instructions for dances popular in African American culture. Visitors can dance along with instructors and see their images displayed on a large screen.

L3: Community Galleries: Making a Way Out of No Way consists of numerous exhibits related to military, sports, medicine, science, business, education, church, social, and fraternal organizations. The exhibits show the tremendous successes of African Americans who rose to the top of their professions and includes inventions and accomplishments that were never publically recognized, solely because the person behind the discovery or invention was African American.

To learn that the first gas mask was invented by an African American, Garrett A. Morgan, came as a surprise to us. Even more surpris-



Liz and Gladys in the *Negro Motorist Green Book* interactive exhibit. The *Green Book* was a travel guide published in the mid-20th century that provided African Americans with information regarding on-the-road restaurants and lodging.

ing was the fact that our federal government revoked Morgan's contract and rejected his invention upon learning that he was black. Morgan developed more than 300 other inventions (including the traffic light), yet his name did not appear in my history book. Nor did I know that Jackie Bouvier Kennedy's wedding dress was designed and tailored by Ann Cole Lowe, an African American who designed and tailored clothing for many famous American and foreign dignitaries.

The L3 exhibits confirmed what I already knew: African Americans have made many

contributions to build and help America maintain its position as the greatest country in the world. These contributions spread across every profession and can be seen in every aspect of American life. Looking at these exhibits, seeing the images of these great men and women, and reading about their contributions makes one realize that African Americans, as a people, have finally become part of America's whole story. We can no longer be relegated to a page or two, or even a single chapter, in America's history books.

L4: Culture Galleries presents African American culture in a new light, from the familiar to the unfamiliar. It includes musicians in jazz, blues, gospel, classical, hip-hop, rock 'n' roll, and country-western — famous performers and less familiar ones — as well as visual arts icons and sports figures. The relationships among the various

art forms and how these art forms are influenced by the African American cultural experience is clearly demonstrated through these exhibits.

The museum, not surprisingly, features numerous exhibits extolling the achievements of African American heroes in politics and the civil rights movement. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, Barbara Jordan, Shirley Chisholm, and Jesse Jackson are among the politicians and civil rights leaders who dared to question, challenge, and, in many cases, risk their lives to bring about social and political change.

There were, however, other great men and women — icons in their own fields of endeavor — who were also activists for equality and civil rights, including Madam C. J. Walker, Mary McLeod Bethune, Muhammad Ali, Arthur Ashe, Jackie Robinson, Paul Robeson, Jesse Owens, Louis Armstrong, Harry Belafonte, and Roosevelt (Rosey) Grier.

I found the cultural expressions exhibit to be the most intriguing, especially when I thought of the media outcry from the dominant culture when Michelle and Barack Obama did the famous fist bump during the

2008 presidential campaign. The fist bump, a congratulatory expression thought by some to represent a terrorist gesture, generated sufficient controversy for a photo of it to land on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*. As I viewed this exhibit — many of its images exploring and explaining cultural nuances — it became abundantly clear to me how little the dominant culture knows about the subcultures of this country. While I do see cross-cultural knowledge improving, I realize we have only begun the process of understanding and appreciating our differences.

When museum director Lonnie Bunch was interviewed by Anthony Bogues in *Callaloo: A Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters* (Volume 38, No. 4, 2015), he was asked, "What is it that is distinctive about this museum?" Bunch responded: "There are two things that make the National Museum of African American History and Culture unique. First, this museum is explicitly about making America better by confronting its tortured racial past. It's not a place simply to commemorate and touch the past. It's a place that makes it clear that the past is a useful tool — maybe even a small weapon — to be used to help change America, to help force America to confront the chasm between its stated ideals and the reality of life in America for the people who are oppressed and marginalized. ... But it also has to do it in a way that's engaging, in a way that moves us forward as a nation. ... This museum must be firm as it stands at the forefront of creating a safe place to have conversations about race so we can help America live up to her promises."

Later in the interview, Bunch said: "... [P]eople will come to the Smithsonian and deal with issues that they won't deal with anywhere else. If the museum isn't about social justice, if the museum isn't about making America better, then it really is a nineteenth-century museum in a twenty-first-century space. I want it to be a twenty-first-century museum."

I say the National Museum of African American History and Culture is indeed a 21st-century museum. And it is a must-see for *every* American. Never before have I witnessed African American history presented as such an integral part of American history and presented with such clarity and in such an engaging manner. This museum created in me a **NEW SENSE OF PRIDE**. ✧