From Trial to Triumph: Representations of African Americans in Museum Exhibits

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

FROM TRIAL TO TRIUMPH:
REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN MUSEUM EXHIBITS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY
DERRICK R. BROOMS

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Admission to Clark Atlanta University enabled me to continue my studies in the field of African and African American Studies at the graduate level. I acknowledge and am grateful for the fortune of studying at this institution, as it ultimately led me to my current path. I decided on a sociological discipline and Loyola University Chicago provided me with an opportunity to pursue my doctorate.

Dr. Judith Wittner, Dr. Peter Whalley, and Dr. Anne Figert helped guide me in my Loyola graduate training.

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Dr. Ayana Karanja, my dissertation chair, who believed in my project before I realized that it was a “project. Dr. Karanja exposed me to field of culture and representation and, as a result of her sincere and continued help, this project reflects something that can finally be called a “dissertation.”

Christine Brooms, my life partner, has watched over me and prayed for our health, prosperity and happiness. Your help and support cannot be put into words.

The assistance and essential support of these individuals is acknowledged and deeply appreciated.
I dedicate this dissertation to

Seven exceptional black men:
Rufus Brooms, Jr. (1949-2006)
Rufus Brooms, Sr. (1928-2009)
Jerry Brooms, Sr. … Dedrick Brooms
Neil Bailey, El (1948-1994)
Ray Covington (1924-1998)
B.J. McCoy

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Helen Ellis Brooks Graine Faulkner (Mama) (1906-2000)
Vivian Covington
Anne Richardson (1925-2005)
Lucille Brooms

My Family:
Special thanks to Wilma, Helen, Maine, Jeff, Adam, Joseph, Duff

My siblings:
Dee, Mario, Andre, Reisha

For my wife Christine
and
Danielle, Camille and Gabrielle
Museums are inventions of men, not inevitable, eternal, ideal, nor divine. They exist for
the things we put in them, and they change as each generation chooses how to see and use
those things.

Barbara Newsome and Adele Silver
PREFACE

This dissertation explores African American representations in select ed museum exhibits. The project was conceived from an interdisciplinary framework and the research methodology followed. Identity studies often focus on the ways that individuals construct their personal identities through the products they consume (Kennedy and Danks 2001; Halter 2000; Langman 1998; Frith 1996), or the practice with which they identify. The approach here is a bit different in that I sought to focus on how images and representations within public spaces are both negotiated and articulated. As Langman (1998) has suggested, identity and representations reflect a system of shared cultural narratives as well as more localized scripts of specific positions within the larger group. Unfortunately, more images did not accompany this text due to photography policy at several museums. Consequently many images cannot be included in this text. The reader may note the irony of museums as free, public spaces that limit public consumption. Given these challenges, I had to make reasonable decisions and rational choices in interpreting my museum experiences in conducting this research. The work of my dissertation chair, Dr. Karanja, proved quite helpful. Dr. Karanja’s (1999) analysis of Zora Neale Hurston’s work was informative, as it helped to better my understanding of social identity and personal experience. Dr. Karanja helped to sharpen my perspective and writing by constantly reminding me of my own “place” within the research—which is aligned with Mill’s notion of the sociological imagination. What permeates the
following analysis is an interpretation through the lens of my own narrative. This interpretation, quite often because of necessity, departed from mainstream “ways of knowing”. As Dr. Karanja aptly projects, what we see depends on both who we are and where we are.
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ABSTRACT

In my dissertation, I examine contemporary exhibits about African American history and culture at six museums to explore issues of racial representation, collective identity, and cultural authority. I conduct a systematic two-part investigation of exhibition practices across Black-owned/operated and mainstream museums, one of each in three different cities (Chicago, IL; Milwaukee, WI; and Washington, DC). First, I explore the socio-historic discourses on race as played out in the museum medium and its implications for shaping collective identity. Second, I examine the use of exhibits and other visual mediums located within museums, in the process of representation wherein these visual media symbolize social and cultural identities. This study provides a cross-cultural analysis of how the varying foci of museums shape cultural representations throughout their respective exhibition practices, which in turn fosters narratives and counter-narratives of cultural identity and cultural authority that are [re]negotiated within museums.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As part of my graduate training in sociology, I visited the Du Sable Museum of African American History and Culture during the Spring 2000 semester to investigate visual representation and social identity. In preparation for this project, the class was required to read Lutz and Collins’ (1993) work on dissecting National Geographic, in addition to other scholarly writing. Unknowingly, this class assignment was the beginning of my dissertation project. Initially, I designed my project to investigate how the Du Sable Museum served as a mechanism for helping African Americans define their identity through its exhibits. The Du Sable Museum, like so many others, consists of both permanent and temporary exhibits that display a great range and diversity of African American projections. In my limited understanding of museums at the time, I knew that each museum exhibit sought to tell a story and the exhibits taken together also sought to narrate a larger story.

I “searched” the museum looking for something holistic yet specific enough to fulfill the requirements of the project. In the end, I particularly focused on one exhibit of the museum entitled, “Songs of My People.” A textual reference for the visual display explained that the exhibit captured the African American experience through the unique perspective of African Americans. In this collaborative project, a team of fifty African
American photographers joined forces to create a portrait of African Americans today—to tell the untold stories of pride, determination, courage, tragedy, and triumph of a people much maligned and often misunderstood.

“Crossing the country in search of images, the photographers discovered Black people facing the challenges of a changing nation. They found stories that spoke of the beauty, diversity, troubles, heritage and American-ness of African Americans. They photographed those who have achieved success and those who still struggle for survival.

“They also found hope—mothers, fathers, scholars, athletes, artists, lawyers and the hopeful faces of children who will determine the future of the world. Ordinary people, living extraordinary lives. No one picture tells the whole story. Each photograph is a beat in the rhythm of a song yet unfinished—Songs of My People.”

**Exploring Exhibits at the Du Sable Museum:**

**“Songs of My People”**

What one finds within the exhibit are photographs devoted to images of people and culture of African descent. Understanding the museum as an educational institution allows one to also view these pictures as an attempt to bring forward stories of people and places, drawing people into contact with a much wider set of cultural ideas. More than simple documents, photographs sometimes reinforce and often challenge shared understandings of cultural difference and sameness.

Starting from the proposition that this is the African American experience, these pictures are concerned with the promulgation of images of the world inside the United States boundaries. And even with shots that could have been highly glamorized, filled
with color, ritual and décor, these do not represent the everyday reality. In black and white, usually evoking seriousness or “artful” candor (see Lutz and Collins, 1993), the pictures draw the viewer’s attention away from elaborate color schemes and those fantastic displays of “specialness.” What is critical here is that these pictures portray a reality that is not constricted by one’s social locations. Pictures of teenagers out in the night are scenes that we can all find in our own families, neighborhoods, communities and experiences.

Immediately noteworthy is the simplicity of the photographs—photographs of individuals performing everyday tasks. Yet, they force you to look at the individuals and say, “That could easily be me—or someone that I know.” The pictures do not ask you to look upon them with questioning eyes of difference, but instead, pleas for those sympathetic eyes of sameness. One can envision sons, grandsons, cousins, or nephews out for a relaxing time in the night. These realities portrayed are ever-present in our everyday lives. Curious eyes can find a song/story being narrated through these and similar pictures. If pictures are worth a thousand words, then this exhibit is a very elaborate story. The pictures in this exhibit speak of the beauty, diversity, troubles, heritage, and American-ness of African Americans. Issues of gender and class per se are not major issues in their constructions of African American identity; however, we do see an interplay of cultural sameness. The issue here is not how “realistic” these images of the African American experience are, but about the imaginative spaces that African American people occupy and the tropes and stories that organize their existence in their own minds. These pictures are a self-portrait, concerned with how African Americans
envision themselves. The question then becomes, how do the images purveyed in “Songs of My People” affect this space? What do these pictures seek to represent; not by their stated aim but by the mission that is represented through the images pictured. Do they compel identification? Do the pictures invite readers/viewers to imagine how they might feel in the setting depicted? Still, there might be varieties of identification that may be evoked—as in every racial/ethnic group. Does the identification rely on static humanistic principles that assert universal sameness across boundaries of race, class, gender, language, and politics? Or on a progressive humanism that seeks to understand and historicize the differences that separate interconnected human beings?

Figures 1 and 2: African American Cultural Work

In reviewing “African American Cultural Work” (Figures 1 and 2), I wrote in my notes, “What do these pictures hope to represent?” The pictures evoke meaning through cultural understanding and instant identification. The only connection that you can make as to the people who it represents is the hands displayed in both pictures (only showing the hands). These images are connections to cultural traditions that transcend generations
and geography. These images help our cultural understanding by creating a lineage of actions that are cornerstones of African American cultural practices. The images seek to exceed assumptions by showing what is relevant to African American culture; therefore, there was no need for the photographer to capture a face, a body, or even a person. However, as we are well aware, African Americans are not the only people who eat these foods. So, while at one instance showing specificity of a particular food (cultural item), the picture also shows sameness and has the ability to appeal to a wider audience because of the long traditions of family work across cultures.

Paying close attention to the themes of everyday life and sameness, these images show how these themes are carried out and easily depicted in the photo images. Examining these pictures one sees that there are elements of recognition and identification, something approaching a recreation of recognizable experiences (Hall 1996). These and other issues have sparked interest across the social sciences and humanities in the question of how people represent various kinds of human difference—race, ethnicity, gender, and class—to themselves and each other. At the same time, then, arise questions and interest in the question of how people represent various kinds of human sameness. What is encoded in the photographs—that of African Americans, across class and educational lines? It is evident that the photographs speak to, and draw into their vision, a far larger group. In considering the proposed/intended audience, it can be argued that this follows along with the same theme of the museum. Museums have an immediate, targeted audience consisting of the very people that it attempts to represent
and the larger social community where these images are viewed as representations of the African American experience.

These images are not commercially produced. The people to whom their messages are directed are easy to appropriate, subvert and use these images to their own end (see Lutz and Collins 1991). Still, the works remain subject to their viewer’s interpretations. As Tagg (1993) has argued, in an attempt to create photographic realism, photographers must historicize the spectator. That is, they must consider to whom and under what conditions photographic images will appear “realistic.”

Figure 3: African American Youth

“"African American Youth” (Figure 3) depicts four little girls, two in the foreground and two in the background. They are eating apples and staring into the camera. They have the gaze, the questioning eyes of childhood that transcend race. The picture shows
companionship, innocence, and simplicity —those traits characteristic of childhood. The background is seemingly irrelevant, the photographers want to focus your attention on the individuals of this picture, not what surrounds them. However, the focus on individuals as subjects of the photograph is shifted in a different set of images (Figure 4 and Figure 5). The photographers display multiple meanings in these images such as culture, history and heritage are juxtaposed with national and aspiring symbols.

Figure 4: Vote Here

In “Vote Here” (Figure 4), a young African American male of barely teenage years is standing at a counter looking directly into the camera. Posted on the glass is a sign that reads, “Vote Here.” “Vote Here” enchants a legacy of dreams longed for by African Americans. The well-documented history of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Arts Movement, and many other “movements” attest to this.
Similarly, you put a young child’s dreamy eyes (Figure 5) juxtaposed with the national flag that supposedly represents equality and justice for all and you have two very powerful images. In reviewing the images, one can recall the contradictions of American justice, definitions and identity. One of the strongest representations of American identity—the American flag—stands as an overt symbol of nationalism that asks, and at times requires, our honor. Taken together and apart as contrasting realities, each picture unveils the trials and tribulations within the African American experience. Pictures can exhibit a range of interpretations and representations, such as the long history of African American trials and tribulations or the more recent history of integration. In either accord, the pictures appeal to African American sympathies, are reminiscent of those dreams long deferred, and raises fundamental questions about African American-ness: what has been the black political experience, as participants in the electoral process; how
has this been experienced by black men, specifically; and, what does the African American experience look like? The first of these questions is rather poignant with Barack Obama’s presidency (2008), which has redefined the black political experience and remapped African American political possibilities. Undoubtedly, much akin to the DuSable’s permanent exhibit on Harold Washington, Chicago’s first black mayor, the future is ripe for a new wave of exhibits on the black political landscape.

In the images used here, “Vote Here” and “Girl with American Flag,” the youth of the subjects of both relate the potential, dreams, and hope that generations of African Americans have held and continue to hold. Both of these youth are portrayed with very solemn facial expressions, which could signify lost opportunities and failed realizations. These pictures also speak to the opportunity to fulfill their potential or bring those dreams that Dr. King spoke of to fruition. In his March on Washington speech Dr. King quipped, “I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” His dream was to give children like these the opportunity to realize their own dreams. These images reflect solidarity; they not only represent the dreams of the children pictured, but also the need to change American society.

With the events that surrounded the 2000 presidential election, “Vote Here” (Figure 4) speaks volumes, as many votes were not counted from Florida. Are African Americans still facing obstacles that held back so many previous generations? What does

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1 Black men receive special notice here as their imprisonment has been one of the catalysts of their political disenfranchisement (see John Calmore, “Reasonable and Unreasonable Suspects: The Cultural Construction of the Anonymous Black Male in Cultural Space (Here be the Dragon)” in Athena D. Mutua, ed. Progressive Black Masculinities (New York: Routledge, 1996).
Dr. King’s dream now mean when African Americans are still denied the right to vote—more than 40 years after passage of such legislation as the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which is set to expire? A lasting impression of the image displayed in “Vote Here,” especially when considered among recent events, is that African Americans still face some of the obstacles that hinder their full participation in American life. This picture informs us that the African American struggle continues and that the victories of the Civil Rights Movement have not vanquished the racism and discrimination within U.S. society (see Bonilla-Silva 2003; Feagin 1994)—even with the election of Barack Obama.

In Figure 5, the juxtaposed American flag serves two purposes. First, it reinforces the idea that this is the face of all African American children, not just the girl pictured here. Secondly, there is symbolic meaning in the way that she is partly hidden by the American flag. This positioning shows how American society ignores part of her, or, as Ralph Ellison would say, makes her “invisible.” The flag physically hiding her represents society hiding her under its ideas of what she should (or should not) be. Furthermore, the picture is an indictment of who is American and what is American. Langston Hughes once asked, “What happens to a dream deferred?” The melancholy eyes of the young girl pictured seem to ask this same question. In his poem, Hughes goes through a series of possible options before ending with the query, “does it explode?” The African American story is replete with examples of deferred dreams of equality, ranging from slavery, to the Black Codes, to the great migration, to the urban ghetto, to the Little Rock Nine, to the Jena Six.

The photographs used throughout this exhibit represent realities within the African American experience. They take the visitor through a full range of emotions and not only remind us of sadness and repression, but they remind us also of hope and opportunity. These images call into remembrance generations of African Americans who felt it their duty to change American society while also portraying those for whom these fights were waged and dreams were formulated. The images include Mali, housework, family work/time, social events and gatherings, various geographic places and spaces and a range of ages. More than anything, the pictures assert the progress made throughout the latter half of the twentieth century and inform us of the work that still needs to be done in the twenty-first century.

**Developing the Current Study**

Within my proposal for the class assignment, I informed the professor that my true interest in this project was to analyze how the Du Sable Museum defines and presents African American history. I wanted to investigate how the museum is arranged; what/why were particular images chosen; how group identity was/is constructed; what were the sources of the images; why they were “considered” important; what is it that the museum is trying to portray? These were the initial questions that my project sought to answer. Additionally, I considered exploring the museum’s literature to research the history of the museum and interviewing visitors to analyze their perceptions of the displays. I wanted to interview museum staff, as they were key players in determining which images were displayed. Further, I thought it would be “interesting” to do a parallel study between museums comparing and contrasting how other museums portray African
American history. Thinking it another useful data source, I wanted to submit a visual representation of the museums’ displays.

In addition, my work in a course entitled “Culture, Memory and Identity” helped inform me of different ways of thinking. In one particular assignment, we reviewed Sharpley-Whiting’s (1999) work on the Venus Hottentot, which itself served as a “traveling carnivale” museum. Sharpley-Whiting argues that ideas of identity, representation, and knowledge of the “Other” are never objective and asserts that speaking, or representing, is an act of empowerment. In its “examination” of Sarah Bartmann and its later fascination with Josephine Baker, French literary history desired to “fit” black femininity into a prescribed category of misunderstanding. Throughout the nineteenth century, the French not only were preoccupied with colonizing Africa in a continental sense, but also attached the same measures of exploitation to the lives of people from those shores—especially black women in this case. Black women were colonized [exploited] in a physical sense in that their femininity was dissected through cultural annexation. The French had no use for black women other than as erotic and exotic entertainment; therefore, there was no need to legitimate the true characteristics of black femininity. As Sharpley-Whiting argues, their main desire was to use African imagery—concocted through their subversive imaginations with no real legitimacy—to affirm French identity, culture, and normativity (1999:57). During the early twentieth century, Sharpley-Whiting argues that African Americans came to signify a new sort of black primitivity outside of French African colonies. Reading this work and completing assignments helped develop my understanding of how notions of the “Other” are
developed and appropriated. What was most evident from Sharpley-Whiting’s work, and that which informed my early decisions for my dissertation, is that African Americans need a critical oppositional space to redefine and even reinvent themselves. As Sharpley-Whiting suggests, the act of representation allows for a return to the self, an exploration of the self, such that there is a continued need to revisit African American representations in order to challenge the hegemonic inscriptions of the black experience.

Based on my research experience, my methods were determined by my dissertation questions. My initial research question (What history is the Du Sable Museum trying to choreograph through its images, pictures and displays?) was extended to several museums across three different cities. In trying to answer my research questions, I was particularly interested in the projection of African American identity, the dialogue between exhibits across the museum, and how museums created dialogue amongst each other. As I continued to developed questions, I learned that there was very little sociological literature on African Americans and museums.

What stories do we decide to tell about African Americans? Is the African American story about struggle or triumph? Coming from an African American Studies background, my personal lens is geared toward triumph—how else do we define African American perseverance through slavery, discrimination and racism? The African American story, even when examining the lowest points, is about overcoming obstacles and rising above/beyond mainstream expectations. Exhibits on individuals such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Harold Washington and Bessie Coleman are not about individuals; similarly, in looking toward the future, any exhibit about Barack Obama is
not simply about him as an individual, but rather will be situated within an African American historical continuum that relies heavily on social and collective meaning. It will not simply serve as an individual story of triumph, but as a collective story of achievement. It will necessarily tie in to other historical firsts in order to highlight African Americans’ long march toward freedom and equality. It will use the status of the American presidency as a symbol to “measure” African American racial, social and political progress. Any exhibit about Barack Obama will be used to challenge future generations to aspire to achieve at an even higher level (much like Dr. King’s legacy).
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL DESIGN

Most contemporary inquiries into cultural representations of the American experience at museums are situated outside of the sociological purview. Anthropologists, historians, and museum studies have provided key insights into these workings. Much of the sociological work has examined the structure of museums, how mainstream museums have incorporated different slices of racial/ethnic experiences, and how ethnic museums operate within the United States’ cultural landscape. However, to a large degree, African Americans and Black-centered museums have been left out of these discussions even though African American public history is a long history (Stewart and Ruffins 1986). Thus, a significant contributor to the American experience, namely the African American, remains unexplored. The present study begins to fill this gap through a cross-cultural analysis of African American representations in museum exhibits.

With the momentum of the social movements of the 1960s, the creation of Black-centered museums—institutions designed to speak to the experiences of Blacks in America—established a critical turning point in the negotiation of culture, ethnicity, and identity for African Americans. Initially, these institutions aimed to provide a space for

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3 The term “Black-centered museum” is used similarly to Eichstedt and Small’s (2002) “Black-centric” in order to denote museums that are designed by and for African Americans.
displaying African American art and culture while simultaneously providing space for African Americans to constitute their own cultural work in the form of representations and other visual images. Mainstream museums often reflected dominant social and political attitudes which were in conflict with the African American community’s own sense of cultural and collective identity. The existence of black-centered sites was one way to resolve this conflict. Additionally, because of their cultural specific scope, Black-centered museums provided a counter-narrative to that of the mainstream by speaking to the issue of social and cultural authenticity. Examining the “museum as contact zone” as articulated by Clifford (1988), the historical moments that have shaped mainstream institutions can be viewed as a site of cultural conflict. The contact zone is a site of colonial encounters where established ongoing relations between the “colonizer” and “colonized” are revisited, reestablished, renegotiated, and/or re-evaluated (Clifford 1988).

Changes in exhibition practices reflect shifts in contemporary social and political attitudes as well as changing ideas about the role of the museum in society. While the museum exhibition reflects these discourses, it also takes part in shaping the way Americans view themselves in relation to the nation (Duncan 1991). In addition, the museum acts as a key site for collective memory. While ethnic museums can provide an important space for negotiating and managing identities, their representations are simultaneously situated alongside—and often against—those images projected by mainstream media (see Eichstedt and Small 2002; Stewart and Ruffins 1986). These projected images, from museums and mass media alike, are an essential element of the presentation of self that many African Americans use to establish their identity. Museums
function as complex repositories of African American culture. Additionally, museums may be used to develop self-identity, thus serving as a vehicle for the nuanced exploration of cultural and historical memory. Collective identity in Black-centered museums creates a space for interrogating generational influences and the tensions arising from the relationship between the past and the present. When examined closely, culture, history, memory, and imagination rely on ancestral sites of memory for meaningful interactions with the museumgoer (see Nagel 1994).

By tracing the contest over cultural authority and African American identity, this study analyzes socio-historic discourses on race as played out in the museum medium and its implications for shaping collective identity. By way of examining contemporary exhibits about African American history and culture at museums, this study explores issues of racial representation, ethnic/cultural identity, and collective memory. The study explores African American representations in Black-centered and mainstream museums, one of each in three different cities. The museums included in this study are located in Chicago (DuSable Museum of African American History and Culture and the Chicago Historical Society), Milwaukee (America’s Black Holocaust Museum and the Milwaukee Public Museum), and Washington, DC (Anacostia Museum & Center for African American History and Culture and the National Museum of American History). Each museum serves as a case study of representative moments in museum history that expose the historically specific political and social interests that shape museum exhibitions.

4 In this dissertation, I use the terms “Black” and “African American” interchangeably.
Specifically, some of the social representations that have impeded African American’s ability to conform to the dominant ideology of what it means to be American are addressed within this study. Black-centered museums have continuously challenged and refuted the historical misrepresentations of Black national and gendered identity, and the cultural implications of those representations. By analyzing the historical shift in the representations of African Americans (in both visual displays and naming/categorizing) and the simultaneous commodification and dehumanization of African Americans, this study explores the complexity of representations that museums use to inform and articulate racial, ethnic and cultural identities. Finally, examining cultural images housed in Black-centered museums provides a framework for examining how Black institutions resist hegemonic stereotypes by deploying representational strategies that evoke the diverse and rich cultural legacies of African Americans.

**Literature Review**

This section will review the literature that gives empirical and theoretical guidance to these arguments. This review includes a discussion of the historical and contemporary roles of museums, and a brief history of African Americans and museums. The process of identity formation as these emerge in museum-community relations is also discussed, taking into account recent debates on identity choices and concomitant representations. The last section of the literature review emphasizes the representation of ethnic groups within and outside of their respective institutions, where issues of authority, autonomy and legitimacy come into play.
Historical Roles, Responsibilities, and Purposes of Museums

A closer look at the museum as a public sphere which both shapes and is shaped by constantly changing public discourse will help us understand its limits and possibilities as a medium of cultural reproduction and resistance. In the nineteenth century, the museum became a space where certain ways of knowing tied to the production and maintenance of democratic governance were opened to public scrutiny and debate (Jackson and Robbins 1999). Evidence and data gathered from practices associated with experimentation, classification, and comparison could be visually fixed and injected into the public sphere of museum discourse in a way that allowed the public to know as well as be known (see Karp and Lavine 1991). In the recent past, exhibitions and collections have increasingly become contests over relations between museums and communities. The debates that have ensued have developed from the way in which museum activities—collecting, preserving, studying, interpreting, and exhibiting (see Noble 1970)—relate to the other institutions and communities that comprise the social order. When people enter museums they do not leave their cultures and identities at home; nor do they respond passively to museum displays. They interpret museum exhibitions through their prior experiences and through the culturally learned beliefs, values, and perceptual skills that they gain through membership in multiple communities.

Works about the impact of multiculturalism in the museum rarely engage the historical legacy of traditional museum practices in the United States. Karp and Lavine’s (1991) collection of research is critical here, as their work investigates the correlation between present-day museum operations and historical museum practices and, most
pertinent to my study, how museum practices construct narratives that shape representations of collective identity. Furthermore, discussions abound regarding the very structure of museums, how museums present history (social, cultural and art), exhibit practices, and the visual reinforcement of the size and location of museum buildings. As Hall (1981) has observed, the presence or absence of African American culture in these museums functions as a means of inclusion or exclusion of that group.

As evinced by the extensive discussion generated by the “Enola Gay” exhibit, the museum is a site of controversy in creating, sustaining and reinforcing “national identity” (see Zolberg 1998; Linenthal and Englehard 1996). Anderson (1991) asserts that nationality is a cultural artifact, an imagined and exclusive political community. Through various instruments, including the museum, the boundaries of nationhood are defined (Anderson 1991; Duncan 1991). Any contention over what constitutes a legitimate museum exhibition is also a struggle to define the meaning and boundaries of nation.

In their discussion of the poetics and politics of museum display, Karp and Lavine (1991) illustrate how the selection of knowledge and the presentation of ideas and images are enacted within a power system. The sources of power are derived from the capacity of cultural institutions to classify and define peoples and societies. The power to represent is to reproduce structures of belief and experience through which cultural differences are understood (Karp and Lavine 1991; Hall 1997). In order to present and preserve group identity, institutions such as museums are major components in the culture and therefore must use imagined space to connect people within these realms (Anderson 1991). Museums can shape, portray, define, and re-define the people, community, and location
of a desired group. Museums are a catalyst in putting forth images that are a summation of the group experience (Coombes 1994).

As integral parts of society, museums play a major role in expressing, understanding, developing, and preserving the objects, values and knowledge that society values and on which it depends. It has been noted that arguments about the social significance of museums assert that museums can provide services that other institutions cannot. As repositories of knowledge, value, and taste, museums educate, refine, or produce social commitments beyond those that can be produced in ordinary educational and civic institutions (Karp and Lavine 1991). For example, museums are sometimes held up as the antidote (but not the substitute) to the failure of families to engage in moral education—or so the argument goes. Underlying this line of thinking is the assertion that museums play a unique role in civil society.5

As significant elements in civil society, museums articulate social ideas. They define relations with communities whether they intend to or not. The process of making meaning and of negotiating and debating identity—localized in institutions such as museums—provide the unwritten, ever-changing constitution of civil society. The social ideas of civil society are articulated and experienced through striving for consensus and struggling against the imposition of identity (Karp and Lavine 1991). As communities, museums have links that are imagined through language and images. In an imagined sense, we see identities as a cultural artifact of a particular kind. Museums, especially

5 See the fall 1990 issue of New Perspectives Quarterly, “The Stupidification of America,” in which conservatives, liberals, and radicals debate the causes of the declining standards of American education. Museums have both found and positioned themselves into these types of debates in justifying their existence and negotiating their roles in civil society.
those that are ethnic and cultural-specific, have the added responsibility to compensate
for the failure of other institutions, such as schools, to show members of minority groups
their stake in society (Gaither 1984). Museums are unique institutions and are ripe with
unique spaces that allow for the play of identities, which in turn provides a wide range of
identity work through the museums’ exhibitions and programs. Museums that serve
communities with multiple identities, such as African American museums, are now
important locations for innovative practices that will show the way for mainstream
museums to expand their constituencies and reform their exhibiting and educational
programs (Ruffins 1992). Here, we will see the boundaries of “community”
deconstructed to intersect across racial, ethnic and cultural lines.

African Americans [and] Museums

Ruffins (1998) provides a concise history of African Americans and museums,
noting that museums and archives devoted to what is now called the African American
experience have a long history. Of particular note, Ruffins identifies that the first
museum dedicated to African American culture was founded on paper at Howard
University (a historically Black college) in 1867, and the first museum to take life was at
Hampton Institute in 1868. Major collections of archival materials were established
before 1900, most famously by Dr. Jesse B. Moorland at Howard University and by
Arthur Schomburg in New York City in the 1880s.6 Their collections and others have
been combined into the present Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard, and the

6 See Elinor Des Verney Sinnette, Arthur Alfonso Schomburg, Black Bibliophile and Collector: A

In the past twenty years, there has been an explosion of museums dedicated to preserving and interpreting the African American experience in America. This work has benefitted from significant contributions from both the public and private sectors. Ruffins (1998) notes that the historians who produced the “social history” revolution in scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s wrote to recover the voices of the “voiceless” slaves and put them back into American history in their rightful places. Works by African American scholars changed the landscape of American history and paved the way for more than two generations of inquiry into the lives of many Americans who did not leave great records of their lives. This historical journey also served as the impetus to establishing institutions to house these inquiries.

As scholars began to ask new questions and search for new sources, the 1970s ushered in a period of progressive inclusion of African American cultural representations into the mainstream of American media (Kook 2002). By the late 1970s, African American history was part of most American public and academic institutions. This general trend was reflected, and reinforced, by the establishment of separate African

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American museums whose purpose was to define the narrative of this group’s history and its potential relationship (or rather relationships) to American identity (Stewart and Ruffins 1986). This was possible largely because of the support and attention given to African American history.

African American public history, during this same period, gained access to mainstream American institutions of culture such as the Brooklyn Museum, the Field Museum of Chicago, the Los Angeles County Museum of Arts, the National Portrait Gallery, and the National Museum of History and Technology. These museums started organizing exhibits that emphasized African American contributions to American social and cultural history. At the same time, documentary and feature films in addition to television specials were funded to report on African American issues. Finally, African American history was incorporated into the public school agenda through special assemblies and lectures during the Black history month, and in general, observance of this month became regular calendar events in most major white universities across the nation (Stewart and Ruffins 1986).

Within museums and across other social, cultural and educational institutions, there are currently complex debates about the telling of African American history, the selection of cultural images, and how African Americans should be represented. For example, Ruffins (1998) asks is the story of black separation, isolation, and achievement against the odds the primary narrative and context for discussion African Americans? Ruffins asserts that in most African American museums, some version of this narrative is absolutely central; it fulfills African American’s need for a validating and distinctive
history. However, for other Americans troubled by the history of segregation, the great narrative of African American life has much more to do with integration into and acceptance by the mainstream of American life (1998:92). This ideology has been instrumental in the selecting of images and stories presented about African American life in non-Black museums.

**Museums and Identity Construction**

Identities are not easily known or clearly experienced phenomena. Personhood, Fortes (1987) observes, poses problems that individuals have to solve. These include formulating answers to the questions of how we know ourselves to be the person we are supposed to be and how we display our personhood. These questions arise out of the distinction that is commonly made between the person (the socially defined aspect of the self) and the individual (the uniquely experienced side of the self). Identities are constructed in performance (Goffman 1959) and interaction with others (Becker 1986; Mead 1934; Cooley 1902). Some identities, such as race, gender, and ethnicity, seem to be more permanent than other identities. Saussure (1974) argues that identity is a function of differences within a system. Therefore, any identity is relational and depends upon its difference from, and negation of, some other term (Hall and du Gay 1996). Understood this way, cultural/ethnic identities are constituted in and through their relationship to what they are not. That is, a particular culture is understood by its distinctions from and oppositions to other cultures (Morley and Robins 1995). Therefore, the critical factor for identifying an ethnic group becomes the “social boundaries, which define the group with respect to other groups, not the cultural reality within the borders” (Schlesinger
1987:235). Some scholars argue that it is our own internal claim to ethnicity that makes us an ethnic group (Cornell and Hartman 1998; Jenkins 1994) as well as the recognition and validation of others.

Four components used by Karp and Lavine (1991) in the process of identity formation as these emerge in museum-community relations are useful to this research. These include: (1) identities are defined by the content and form of public-culture events such as exhibitions; (2) identities are subjectively experienced by people participating in public culture, often in ways conditioned by their other identities and experiences; (3) expressions of identities can contain multiple and contradictory assertions—that is, there can be more than one message in a single expression or performance of identity—and the same is true for the experience of identities; and (4) identities are rarely, if ever, pure and uncontaminated by other identities, because they are usually fabricated from a mix of elements.

This is similar to the observations made by Mills (1959) and Giddens (1991), both of whom argued that the connection between social actors and social structures is dynamic. This also is argued by Du Bois ([1903] 1965) in his notion of double-consciousness. These authors declared that the interaction between social actors and social structures leads to socio-historical change on the global level. Therefore, personal life is not separate from social circumstances.

Anderson (2002) notes that the issues that concern African American museums are not unrelated to larger, more general themes that draw attention in the international world of ideas, such as modernism, deconstructionism, and other thrusts in the arena of
contemporary criticism. As a result, the critical, social-historical, and art-historical contributions of African American museums are urgently needed in mainstream discussions of such themes. Additionally, African cultures are perceived as part of the symbolic and actual legacy of black people in America (Anderson 2002:115). This point was especially made with the proposition to rename/re-label Blacks as “African Americans.” The ideology behind this movement was to connect to a homeland and to establish a cultural heritage (Martin 1991).

However, the problem is not how people choose identities, but the checkered history of how those identities have been manifested in society and exhibited in museums. James Baldwin describes how African Americans have subjectively experienced the public denial of their identity (also referred to as silences) in a way that illuminates the suspicion many African Americans and other minority peoples feel toward museums:

> It is a very grave matter to be forced to imitate a people for whom you know—which is the price of your performance and survival—you do not exist. It is hard to imitate a people whose existence appears, mainly, to be made tolerable by their bottomless gratitude that they are not, thank heaven, you.\(^8\)

The silences do more than simply deny African American existence. In exhibitions that celebrate cultural achievement, the very fact that the achievements of people of color are ignored introduces implicit messages about their worth. Marzio (1991) argues that a hierarchy of cultures is erected in which those worth examining are separate from those that deserve to be ignored. Racial imagery and ethnocentrism can be communicated by

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what is not exhibited as well as by what is. This speaks to the role of absences in the construction of meaning (Hall 1981).

Another aspect of constructing identity through museum exhibitions is audience. Serving one’s audience means designing programs that are tailored to its needs and that anticipate future requirements and demands. This allows museums an opportunity to develop programs and educational activities that respond very directly to community concerns and issues—such as identity (Stewart 1990). Many African American museums have this as one of their core aims. In one sense, the museum serves as a source of presenting African American history and culture. As such, it has a necessary responsibility to the African American community in telling, displaying and exhibiting images that are representative of African American identity. At the same time, it also has a responsibility to the larger non-African American community. As an educational institution, the museum must give other cultures a better understanding of African American history, art, culture and contributions to the nation and world.

Kaeppler (1992) discusses the representation of ethnic groups within and outside of their respective communities. The capacity for museums to influence public perceptions—and, hence, representations of cultures—rests in part on the fact that museums are regarded as “historical treasure houses” in which material culture and links with history are enshrined. This is an important concept for the current study, as each exhibit is ensconced with multiple narratives and can be viewed from a variety of perspectives.
Cultural Presentation vs. Self-Representation

I use the terms “presentation” and “self-representation” to distinguish between an outsider presenting the culture and history of another ethnic group and a member of a particular group representing their own culture and history. An outsider relies on his/her knowledge (valid or otherwise) to present the other group while a group member adds to this knowledge by drawing on his/her experiences as part of the group.

In the interpretation of relationships between museums and communities and, thus, of history, insider and outsider perspectives need to be considered—for it is often those outside the community or a culture who assume authority to speak for or present that culture or community. Implicit in the insider/outsider perspectives is the importance of documenting the cultural contributions of any group of people and formulating policy to ensure responsible collecting practices (Kreamer 1992). But the larger question here becomes who has the right to speak for any particular group? And, how do groups incorporate both personal visions and group perspectives into representations of their cultural history?

In her work on the history of preservation of African American culture, Ruffins (1992) asserts that in this preservation history interior (African American) and exterior (non-African American) narratives and interpretations are simultaneously operative and that both kinds of narratives reflect prevailing preservation interests—and their historical and political referents—at particular points in time. Ruffins notes that personal memory and narrative are important components in the recorded and collected histories of African Americans. She describes three types of narratives concerning the past—memory,
mythos, and history—that deal with personal and collective experiences and interpretations of past events that are now preserved in the historical record (Ruffins 1992). Additionally, archaeological findings have increased the availability of material culture with which to authenticate African American lived experiences and cultural contributions within the American record (Singleton 1995; Ferguson 1992).

The exclusion experienced by African Americans for much of their history has resulted in a parallel exclusion of African American materials in mainstream museums. Preservation efforts also have influenced African Americans’ perceptions about what is important to preserve. Ruffins (1992) asserts that these perceptions were and are intimately linked with changing notions of identity. Nineteenth-century preservation strategies sought to reinforce the heroic aspects of that era’s African American historical mythos, consequently what was preserved was not the vernacular objects of ordinary rural folk, who were the majority of the African American community, but those items that extolled the African American elite’s vision of what they wanted to be. In historically white institutions, preservation of African American materials was impeded by racist nineteenth-century social Darwinist theories that supported notions of black inferiority (Ruffins 1992).

Over time, changes in preservation strategies had a significant impact on the ways in which African Americans created and maintained visual projections and self-representations. For example, the sense that African Americans had a special destiny and a unique role in the history of the United States underwent a change in the early part of the twentieth century, coming to reflect a point of view that locates the beginnings of
African American history not in the place to which they came to America enslaved but rather in Africa. The theme was continued during the Black Consciousness Era in the latter part of the twentieth century, in which cultural activities embraced the African past and encouraged unity with contemporary Africans in their struggle to eliminate the hegemonic forces of colonialism and neo-imperialism (see Ruffins 1992, 1998).

According to Stewart and Ruffins (1986), it is significant that during the Black Consciousness Era the vast majority of African American museums and cultural institutions were founded. Most of them began with a mandate for “positive education” from the communities they served, and operated on the principle that museums can be vehicles for social change. Because of the political, social, and economic climate of the 1960s, discussion, debate, and open communication were seen as the most effective means for incorporating a multiplicity of voices (and images) in the museum process and for ensuring that the diversity and complexity of the African American experience would be represented in ways that met community expectations and needs.

Above, I review previous research that has linked racist and ethnocentric factors to the misrepresentation of African Americans in mainstream museums. In response, African Americans established their own institutions in order to preserve their histories. Previous findings demonstrate how racism and the increasing power of ethnocentric ideologies dictated that few African American objects, documents, or vernacular traditions were preserved in major American museums. These omissions led to widespread negative stereotypes of African Americans throughout mass media.
However, the early efforts of African American colleges and universities, coupled with those of contemporary scholars, constituted a critical moment in the history of African American preservation efforts. The creation of Black-centered museums was an important institution-building outcome of the Black Consciousness Era. These museums sheltered alternative Black cultural activists and served as repositories for more representational art and cultural expression. The influence of Black-centered museums was not limited to African Americans. In recent years, mainstream museums have become a highly contested ground precisely because of questions of inclusion, diversity, and multiculturalism. Additionally, although not fully explored in this work, funding is a major component of these contests as mainstream and culturally specific museums both vie for funding—in many instances from the same sources.

**Theoretical Design**

This research used concepts and perspectives drawn from three primary literatures: studies of racialization, collective memory, and work in museum studies.

The notion of racialization comes from the work that calls attention to the way objects (Small 1997), people (Davis 1991), and processes (Omi and Winant 1994; Miles 1989) become identified as “racial”. Such terms highlight the fact that objects, people, and relations are never inherently about race, but rather become racialized through a social process of making meaning and allocating resources. This research project examines museums as sites in which racialized ideologies are created, organized and maintained and the consequences for those identified as African American. This analysis lends insight into the structures, institutional practices, ideological articulations of race,
and connective links with the past in the contemporary United States. As a result, this research contributes to the understanding of the construction and social reproduction of race and culture (Nagel 1994; Bourdieu 1993).

**Race and Ethnic Identity**

The social sciences have come to reject the biologistic notions of race in favor of an approach that regards race as a social concept. The pioneering work of W.E.B. Du Bois ([1903] 1965) viewed race and racial differences as historically contingent social constructions. Du Bois not only defended the preservation of black culture through race organization, race solidarity, and race unity, but he also appealed to a larger “human brotherhood” and “common humanity” (1965:177, 181). Du Bois notes deterritorialization—which was central in creating a black Diaspora—is also, paradoxically, a source of group identity and strength. Du Bois maintained that the black experience in the United States is fragmented and contingent, while he stressed there were options for choice (see also Waters 1990). A central theme of the work was the expansion of community through black migration and through the increasing diversity of black culture. His vision for the active construction of Self and community rested on his dialectical tension between participation in the white world and in the black world. As Zimmer (1995) suggests, it was Du Bois’s view that all blacks participate in the black experience, shaping shared community, but all blacks also participate in the American experience, and they do so as individuals. This dialectic of consciousness favors creativity and personal freedom, while it also enhances an understanding of collective experiences.
According to van den Berghe (1967), the term race is used to refer to a group that is socially defined but on the basis of physical characteristics. Small (1994) and Omi and Winant (1994) contend that racial categories and the meaning of race are given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded. Additionally, the concept and substance of identity are reconstructed and re-imagined by particular groups and individuals differently over time (Davis 1991). Similarly, Clifford (1988) contends that culture and identity are part of an ongoing process; this process is contingent upon historical context and subject to multiple forms of appropriation and re-identification by different groups (1988:10). Investigating these constructions within museums allows for an exploration of the ways in which identities are constructed by both the individual and the group as well by outside agents and organizations. These sites are not only reflective of individual and group agency (found in the choices made to determine which part of the story to discuss/display) but also reveal the structural forces at play (museum as institution). This dissertation research further elucidates the ways that racial categories and the meaning of racial identity are negotiated, created and maintained within museums.

Omi and Winant’s (1994) racial formation perspective is useful for my dissertation. They define racial formation as the “process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings” (1994:61). The essence of this approach is the idea that race is a phenomenon whose meaning is contested throughout social life (1994). Omi and Winant contend that the very existence of the category of race is
viewed as the outcome of racialization or “the extension of racial meaning to a previously unclassified relationship, social practice, or group” (1994:64). They further explain the emergence of racial categories as a “sociohistoric” process; that is, the way we define ourselves racially reflects a process that was hundreds of years in the making.

The 1960s Civil Rights Movement, for instance, rearticulated traditional cultural and political ideas about race in the United States, and in the process changed the U.S. government and broadened the involvement of minority Americans in the politics of that government. New social movements regularly emerge, sometimes bringing new identities and political norms. Additionally, the rise of the Black Power Movement, which emphasized Black pride and the validity of Black culture, marked an important change of direction to the integrationist model. The self-image of Blacks was radically revised and the Black community showed signs of unprecedented self-confidence. As a result, many Blacks began to demand a plural society, rather than assimilation into the dominant culture—a demand that had profound effects on the way many other minorities have come to view themselves as well.

Race in the United States is concurrently an obvious and complex phenomenon. The racial categories used in census enumeration have varied widely from decade to decade. Labels play an important role in defining groups and individuals who belong to the groups. This has been especially true for racial and ethnic groups in general and for Blacks in particular. Over the past century the standard term for Blacks has shifted from “Colored” to “Negro” to “Black” and, more recently to “African American.” The changes can be seen as attempts by Blacks to define themselves and to gain respect and
standing in a society that has held them to be subordinate and inferior (see Sanders Thompson and Akbar 2003; Smith 1992; Martin 1991). The variation of names both reflects and in turn shapes racial understanding and dynamics. It establishes often-contradictory parameters of racial identity into which both individuals and groups must fit (Martin 1991). How one is categorized and how one chooses to identify are two separate components of identity work (see Waters 1990). The determination of racial categories and identification is an intensely political process. Viewed as a whole, the census’s racial classification reflects prevailing conceptions of race, establishes boundaries by which one’s racial “identity” can be understood, determines the allocation of resources, and frames diverse political issues and conflicts (Feagin 2000; Omi and Winant 1994).

The research cited here demonstrates that the location and meaning of particular racial boundaries are continuously negotiated, revised, and revitalized, both by racial group members themselves as well as by outside agents. For ethnic groups, questions of history, membership, and culture are the issues addressed by the construction process. The boundaries around and the meanings attached to ethnic groups reflect pure social constructions. In my study, the exhibitions I examine will help illuminate the ways that communal ties based on a shared racial and cultural heritage are produced in the museum. By examining the museum as a mechanism by which groups organize, maintain, and recreate themselves—who they are and what their ethnicity means—I hope to clarify and organize the growing literature documenting the shifting, volitional, situational nature of racial identity.
From the literature on collective memory, specifically the work of Irwin-Zarecka (1994) and Olick and Levy (1997), this dissertation will draw on the idea of memory as an ongoing process of negotiation through time. Examining the influence of local collective memory, formed in mnemonic communities (Zerubavel 1996) or micro-“communities of memory” (Irwin-Zarecka 1994), allows space to investigate how museums activate cultural constraints, reinterprets past historical events and figures, and act as a symbolic basis for group identity. My research supplements the substantive studies on collective memory by taking the museum as an example of institutionalizing memories and examining the museum’s construction of collective memory through representational practices. This dissertation elaborates the concept of collective memory and shows how it is institutionalized in museums.

*Collective Memory*

Olick and Levy (1997) use a case study of official representations of the Holocaust in the Federal Republic of Germany to address the ways in which collective memory constrains political claim-making. In contrast to the commonly held views that the past is either durable or malleable, they characterize collective memory in political culture as an ongoing process of negotiation through time. Additionally, other researchers have broadly noted the ways in which individuals reinterpret past historical events or figures using presently constructed definitions (Schwartz 1997, 1996; Ducharme and Fine 1995). The current research project examines African American slavery and the Civil Rights Movement through a similar lens. For instance, what claims do African Americans and Black-centered museums make with regard to slavery? How
and why has this slavery endured although it has been diminished within current race relations discourses and how has its legacy been (re)articulated? Historical events (such as slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Great Migration) and historical figures (such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Annie Malone) are explored by analyzing various select exhibitions designed in commemoration of their cultural and historical relevance. Within this investigation, I invoke the link between the production of social memory with frames of remembrance and collective memory that therefore indicates memory as indubitably a social phenomenon (Irwin-Zarecka 1994).

Recollection of the past is an active, constructive process, not a simple matter of retrieving information. To remember is to place a part of the past “in the service of conceptions and needs of the present” (Schwartz 1996:374, emphasis added). Underlying this explanation of collective memory is the active past that forms our identities. That is, history is the remembered past to which we no longer have an “organic” relation while collective memory is based on the relevance of the past to the present (see Schwartz 1996). Group memberships provide the materials for memory and prod the individual into recalling particular events and forgetting others (Olick 1999). According to Halbwachs ([1925] 1992), memories become generalized “imagos” over time, and such imagos require a social context for their preservation. Memories, in this sense, are as much the products of the symbols and narratives available publicly—and of the social means for storing and transmitting them—as they are the possessions of individuals.
The museum acquires social authority by controlling “ways of seeing” (Alpers 1991), and the objects around which vision is directed gather meaning from their context within the museum. Furthermore, museums do not just gather valuable objects but make objects valuable by gathering them. Within this context, events, people, and recollections of the past are amplified by their place within the walls of the museum. The museum works to legitimate the past; not just that the past is worth noting, but that particular slices of the past ought to be pronounced (or celebrated) and remembered. This “remembering” is dialectic; on the one hand memories work to valorize its subjects while, on the other hand, they work to endorse the selected subjects. Again, it is worth noting that exhibitions are constructed, which means that choices and decisions have been made regarding such issues as content, context, and placement within the museum. The exhibition then is the end result of these decisions, revealing to the audience what and who are of importance, which institutionalizes memories of different people, places, objects, and events. My research supplements the substantive studies on collective memory by analyzing museums cross-culturally to show how they institutionalize memories through representational practices. This process is characterized by collective memories created in institutional settings that mainly share in frequent narration and focus on events that are specific to the individuals in the group.

Collective memory has been used to refer to aggregated individual recollections, to official commemorations, to collective representations, and to disembodied constitutive features of shared identities (Olick 1999). According to Nagel (1994), the construction of history and culture is a major task facing all ethnic groups. In
constructing culture, the past is a resource used by groups in the collective quest for meaning and community (Cohen 1985). For instance, my dissertation shows how representational practices in Black-centered museums: 1) help legitimize the renegotiation of Black identity from Black American to African American; 2) empower African Americans by providing opportunities to valorize themselves through mythology and history; and 3) aggrandize African Americans through cultural autonomy and space to (re)create authenticity.

More specifically, I argue that Black-centered museums, through their narratives of a mythologized African past, institutionalize a collective memory of culture and history that rearticulates Black local identity to a broader global identity. This collective memory is embedded in ethnic nationalism and intensifies individuals’ awareness of historical identity. I do not wish to assert here that all African Americans subscribe to a global identity (i.e., identify themselves with Africans and those throughout the Diaspora), but rather that representations of Africa in African American museums bring issues such as global identity to the fore of consciousness. Thus, by rearticulating myths of the Black past, African American museums are key sites for displaying the role of human agency in shaping culture—and identity.  

The dissertation is also situated within the field of museum studies. For instance, this research, which examines the negotiation of African American identity within and

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9 The notion of a mythological Black past is taken from Herkovist’s classic, “The Myth of the Negro Past” (1941) where he delineates African cultural influences on American Blacks and showcases the vibrancy of African American culture.
across museums, fits well with the work that demonstrates the “poetics and politics” of museum displays (Weil 2002; Greenberg, Ferguson, Nairne 1996; Sherman and Rogoff 1994; Karp and Lavine 1991), issues of identity (Coombes 1988) and expressions of African American interests (Eichstedt and Small 2002; Ruffins 1992; Horton and Crew 1989; Stewart and Ruffins 1986). Museums are important sites where knowledge and power are created. According to Macdonald and Fyfe (1996), “Museums are never just spaces for the playing out of wider social relations. A museum is a process as well as a structure; it is a creative agency as well as a ‘contested terrain.’” It is because museums have a formative as well as a reflective role in social relations that they are potentially of such influence” (1996:4).

*Museums and Communities*

Museums act as institutions dedicated to fostering and preserving particular ethnic heritages and will be increasingly important in helping Americans understand their historical experience from different perspectives (Macdonald and Fyfe 1996; Hooper Greenhill 1992). Communities often look to museums as places in which identity is articulated (Anderson 1991). As a result, museums have the responsibility of ensuring that exhibitions embody dynamic, not static, depictions of history and culture. Museums are increasingly asked to ensure that their exhibitions resonate with contemporary issues and present-day realities (Kreamer 1992). This is critical in understanding what ethnic and cultural museums have done—and what they have attempted to do—especially as it concerns representations of culture and identity.
According to Gaither (1984), the American cultural arena is a vital and competitive place. In it, cultural expressions from all corners bump into and influence one another. As a result, new forms and ideas are born. Criticisms, interpretations, reassessments of values, claims, and counterclaims abound, and out of the muck come impressions of who people are. Museums are important contributors to this process because they are institutional sponsors of discussions relevant to their disciplines and cultures. Gaither further argues that museums that commit themselves to the criticism and fostering of specific cultural heritages—African American, Hispanic, Native American, Asian—have a unique role to play in such settings since they are at the center of the discussion of their own traditions. Unlike general museums, these institutions treat their cultural heritage neither as a short-term focus nor as an aspect of a larger story. Their heritage and making connections to their [imagined and real] community is their primary subject matter. The presentation of their own cultural traditions is the foundation on which their identity rests (Gaither 1984). These arguments form the basis of the current dissertation project, which clearly shows the necessity of a cross-cultural analysis of museums.

The existence of museums dedicated to specific cultural heritages does not diminish the need for other museums to share in the work of increasing knowledge and understanding. Instead, all museums become partners in the larger enterprise of education. However, it is exactly because of the failure of these other museums to present, represent and explore the historical and cultural experiences of minority groups that make specific cultural museums necessary. Certainly, the complexity of a large
American city (and the American society) is better reflected in a complementary network of many museums, each with its own primary and secondary foci, and all of which, in the aggregate, represent a fuller picture of the community’s historical and cultural life (see Karp and Lavine 1992, 1991).

Lidchi (1997) suggests that two significant critiques of museums have recently been advanced. Both take a constructionist view of representation. The first uses the insights from semiotics and the manner in which language constructs and conveys meaning to analyze the diversity of ways in which exhibitions create representations of other cultures. By considering how meanings are constructed and produced, this critique concerns itself primarily with the semiotics or poetics of exhibiting. The second critique forefronts questions of discourse and power to interrogate the historical nature of museums and collecting. By exploring the link between knowledge and other cultures and the imperial nations, this critique considers representation in the light of the politics of exhibiting.

Both of the critiques mentioned here are pertinent to this dissertation study. The poetics of exhibiting represent the practice of producing meaning through the internal ordering and conjugation of the separate but related components of an exhibition while the politics of exhibiting cause the question of institutional power to be specifically addressed. Museum collections do not simply happen: artifacts have to be made to be collected, and collected to be exhibited. They are historical, social and political events. For Foucault, all knowledge operates as a historical situated social practice: all knowledge is power/knowledge. So ‘strategic knowledge’ is knowledge inseparable from
relationships of power (Foucault 1980). By investigating the poetics and politics of exhibiting, this research demonstrates the shifts in identities, boundaries, and meanings and how they are culturally constructed.

Museums have responsibilities as both educational and social institutions to participate in and contribute toward the restoration of wholeness in the communities of the nation. They have a unique opportunity to increase understanding within and between cultural groups in the matrix of lives in which we often exist. As a result, at different times throughout their existence, museums have provided substance, correction, and reality to the often incomplete and distorted stories about the culture and heritage of different ethnic groups (Macdonald and Fyfe 1996). Gaither (1984) contends that museums committed to specific heritages become the institutional buttress of those traditions because they have unique features. In addition, they extend into imagined spaces as links to those faces and places most often unseen (see Anderson 1991). The close relationship between African American museums and their communities permits the museums to validate the communities’ experiences. The current research project, which focuses on the role of Black-centered museums in constructing African American identity, will examine these processes.

In my dissertation, I examine contemporary exhibits about African American history and culture at six museums to explore issues of racial representation, collective identity, and cultural authority. First, I explore the socio-historic discourses on race as played out in the museum medium and its implications for shaping collective identity.
Second, I examine the use of visual mediums, in the form of displays and exhibits located within museums, in the process of representation wherein these visual media symbolize social and cultural identities. This study provides an account of how the varying foci of museums shape cultural representations throughout their respective exhibition practices, which in turn fosters narratives and counter-narratives of cultural identity and cultural authority that are [re]negotiated within museums.

This research analyzes exhibitions and brochures, museum intent, and the concomitant processes of presentation and representation. As such, this research is based on the premise that the study of museums and identity should be done in a cultural context; museums are one of the ways a society contemplates itself and each time a museum launches a new exhibit it is carrying out a philosophical act that arises from a specific cultural context; the exhibit itself has cultural implications that affect all of society (Weil 2002). Museums and their displays are part of the wider society and therefore the study of museums must take a range of important broader issues into account, and this I have endeavored to do.
CHAPTER 3
METHODS, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AND MUSEUM SELECTION

Museums are, or at least ought to be, rationally organized institutions directed toward articulable purposes— institutions that, at their most excellent, both can and do accomplish those purposes with maximum effect and with minimum waste (Weil 2002). This dissertation is not intended to compare the six museums selected for study across a narrowly defined notion of “museum” as such definition and articulation would assume that all museums are the same. As Weil (2002) asserts, museums are so varied in their physiology (origin, discipline, scale, governance, structure, collections, sources of funding, endowment, staffing, facilities, and community setting) that meaningful comparisons between one another are rarely possible (Weil 2002:5). Furthermore, the dissertation does not look to promote any of the museums as better or worse, but rather to examine the story (or stories) that are told about African Americans through the recent history of exhibitions housed at these museums. All of the museums display the same kinds of objects and are engaged in preservation efforts; by examining the contexts of the objects and what is important to collect, each museum projects a story line of African American experiences. As a result, the museums are seen as five examples within a
larger continuum of museum history practice.¹⁰

This chapter provides a brief history of the six museums included in the study and their interior design—along spatial discussions. It also establishes the features that make each African American-centered exhibit a useful case study while acknowledging the larger representational field into which they all fit. The categorical divide provides a representative sample of contrasting museum foci, which have an institutional impact on the representations of racial identity. The African American sites were selected in order to examine museums whose main purpose is to preserve and interpret the historical experiences and achievements of African Americans. The three mainstream museums are all highly visible in their respective cities. Although not the primary focus, each of these museums make attempts to include some presentation of the African American experience in their exhibitions.

**Research Questions**

Researchers have noted that both the selective presentations of the past (Horton and Crew 1989; Stewart and Ruffins 1986) and the shifting status of African Americans in the American collective identity (Sanders Thompson and Akbar 2003; Kook 1998; Martin 1991) are essential to understanding African American omission and misrepresentation in the wider American context and in museum exhibits in particular. Two key variables that not only influence the use of museums by African Americans but also affect their representations are institutional practices and cultural/ethnic factors (Falk

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¹⁰ I follow a method similar to one James Clifford established in his study of four geographically unique museums. Clifford recognized his museums as variants within a wider field of representations. Similar to Clifford, this component of the research is more concerned with the relationships between the six museums (Clifford 1991).
Establishing Black-centered museums and changing the roles of African Americans in museums has changed how museums present African American culture (Ruffins 1992). However, a comparative investigation into the simultaneous representations of African Americans in Black-centered and mainstream museums has not been explored fully. Therefore, the current study addresses the following research questions:

1. How is African American identity constructed and represented in museum exhibits?

2. What images, representations and stories are selected as exhibits to project African American identity?

3. How do Black-centered museums serve as sites for renegotiating new pasts and identities? How is this replicated (or not) in mainstream museums?

Methodology

I began this research project by investigating black-centered museums in the United States. My first level of search was purely existential and, having created a list of over 100 black-centered museums, I narrowed my focus to museums of history and culture. The second level of search was geographic. When I began this project, I was living in Washington, D.C., which provided a fertile ground of museums from which to
choose within the District, but also offered proximity to several cities that could house my research agenda such as Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Richmond, Virginia to name a few. I was interested in a comparative study, which opened my consideration of Chicago. Chicago was important for two reasons; first, it was the location of my home university and, second, it was also where I was raised. In discussing the project with members of my committee, I decided to add a third locale. Initially, I considered how geographic location and “the city” might influence the development and maintenance of African American museums.

In the end, I focused my attention on six museums located in three different cities throughout the United States to examine African American identity and representation. In each city, one African American museum and one mainstream museum were chosen. These museums included:

**Table 1: Museum Selection**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>African American Museums</th>
<th>Mainstream Museums</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>Du Sable Museum of African American History</td>
<td>Chicago Historical Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milwaukee, WI</td>
<td>America’s Black Holocaust Museum</td>
<td>Milwaukee Public Museum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through preliminary research it became clear that there are multiple windows into the world of museum exhibiting. As a result of the multiple windows, I employed several methodologies in conducting this research including participant observation, interpretative methodology, and content analysis (of the exhibit, the museum, and a variety of different texts). The impetus for these methodologies was Stuart Hall’s work in cultural anthropology.
Qualitative Methods

The primary methodology used in this research was content analysis. I examined museum collections, participated in tours, and engaged in other museum activities where appropriate and applicable. These observations provided access to the first window for investigating racial representations in museums, as exhibited in temporary as well as permanent displays.

This study addresses the use of visual mediums such as drawings, photographs, video, film, artifacts, and other forms of graphic icons located within museums, in the process of representation wherein these visual media “stand for” (symbolize) social and cultural identities. Ethnographies, which “stand in” as written textual re-presentations of other cultures and group identities, have recently been subjected to critique for their pretense to “realism” (Marcus and Fisher 1986). In the current study, I subjected visual re-presentations of African American identity in museums to the same type of critique, which entails a “constructivist” interpretation. In interpreting exhibits, I used methods employed within the field of cultural studies that explore issues such as signifying practices, negotiating standards of balance and objectivity, informational content, and representations of the “Other.” These works in cultural studies explain a variety of approaches to representation that interconnect the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, museum studies, ethnic studies, and art historical models of representation. Using cultural studies techniques, I investigated issues of race, ethnicity, identity, and memory.

In addition to analyzing the exhibits, I collected museum documents available at each museum for analytic purposes. Museum documents include the mission and history
of the museums, brochures, and other tourist literature designed to draw visitors to the
sites. The brochures were analyzed for content. In addition, I purchased items from gift
shops that I thought pertinent to the museum’s history and/or items that support specific
exhibits.

The use of grounded theory allowed me to develop categories from the data itself.
That is, while I went to the museums with a particular interest in understanding what is
being presented to the public, I employed the information provided at the sites themselves
to develop categories for analysis. Based on these categories, I then engaged in content
analysis of the brochures (and films if available) to see whether the same types of words,
phrases, and images are employed in the textual representations specifically designed to
attract visitors. In addition, I was attentive to different categories that were present in
written texts that were not present within the exhibits.

Qualitative Flop

My initial goal was to conduct in-depth interviews with museum staff in addition
to the aforementioned research methods. However, my qualitative data was stumped
because I was only able to conduct one interview over a three-year period. I called each
museum to learn of the person responsible for assisting with research inquiries.
Afterwards, I sent an introductory letter to each museum regarding my research project
and followed up two weeks later with a phone call. Two museum staff members insisted
that they would call me and that I should not call them. The one interview that I did
conduct felt like a covert operation. After agreeing to the interview, my interviewee was
reluctant to answer questions, looked over his shoulders on several occasions, informed
me that I should not use his name under any circumstance, and, after thirty minutes of interviewing decided that he had said enough. I had pleasant conversations with two other museum personnel and had set a date and time for an interview. In both occasions, my interviewees never showed up. They apologized through an email and I set up multiple dates for another potential interview—only for it not to materialize. The individual did send an email apologizing for not being able to meet with me and wished me luck in my research. Having conducted only one interview, coupled with my inability to secure other interviews, my dissertation rests primarily on interpretative methodology and content analysis. Interestingly, while museums are typically thought to be “open” public spaces, my experience suggests a deeper attempt at sequestering of information in the current study.

**Descriptions of Research Sites**

The categorical divide between the two types of museums provide a representative sample of contrasting museum foci, which have an institutional impact on the representations of racial identity. The African American sites were selected in order to examine museums whose main purpose is to preserve and interpret the historical experiences and achievements of African Americans. The Du Sable Museum of African American History was founded in 1961 in the front room of Margaret and Charles Burroughs’ home in Chicago. The Burroughs started this museum because they believed that the public should have a better understanding of Black history, art, culture, and contributions to the nation and the world. It was named for Jean Baptiste Pointe Du Sable, a Black Haitian trader who was the first settler of Chicago. The Du Sable Museum
is the oldest museum of its type in the country and is the only major independent institution in Chicago established to preserve and interpret the historical experiences and achievements of African-Americans. In September 1967, the Smithsonian established the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum of Washington, D.C. The Anacostia Museum was originally envisioned as a neighborhood museum celebrating the history and culture of the predominantly African American Anacostia community. It has expanded over the years to reflect a more comprehensive African American culture. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, James Cameron founded the Black Holocaust Museum in 1988. More of a communal institution, the museum exists to share the history, tragedy, suffering, and torment of that “peculiar institution” slavery and its aftermath following the Civil War, right up to the Civil Rights Movement. According to Cameron, the museum is devoted to preserving the history of lynching in the United States and the struggle of Black people for equality. Due to financial constraints, the museum closed its doors in August 2008.

The three mainstream museums are all highly visible in their respective cities. Although not the primary focus, two of these museums make attempts to include some presentation of the African American experience in their exhibitions. The National Museum of American History opened to the public in January 1964 as the Museum of History and Technology as the sixth Smithsonian building on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. In October 1980, the Museum’s name was changed to 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. The Museum dedicates its collections to inspiring a broader understanding of the United States and its
many people. The Chicago Historic Society is a privately endowed, independent institution devoted to collecting, interpreting, and presenting the rich multicultural history of Chicago and Illinois, as well as selected areas of American history, to the public through exhibitions, programs, research collections, and publications. The Chicago Historical Society collects, exhibits, and interprets documents, images, and artifacts related to the United States and metropolitan Chicago. Founded in 1882, the Milwaukee Public Museum is a museum of human and natural history. The Museum interprets the world’s cultural heritage through the integration of its exhibits, education, collections and research. The Milwaukee Public Museum did not yield any quality data for this research project and, thus, is not included in the analysis.11

Determined Research Sample and Agenda

I conducted museum visits and exhibit reviews over a four-year period, from 2002 until 2006. During this time frame, I analyzed 47 exhibits that were focused on African Americans—none of these exhibits were housed at the Milwaukee Public Museum. I created an exhibit inventory to catalogue each exhibit and, as the exhibit review process grew, I began to categorize each exhibit. Subject matter provided the first level of categorization; from there, I took detailed notes on how the museum exhibited each piece of the African American story through exhibitions. The primary questions were: 1) what is the purpose/goal of this particular exhibit and how is this stated; 2) where is the exhibit placed within the museum; 3) how is the exhibit organized; 4) how is the information in

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11 The lack of data at the Milwaukee Public Museum suggests two things: first, there clearly is a lack of diverse exhibits available to the general public; and, second, the absence of African American representations has widened significantly with the recent closure of The Black Holocaust Museum.
the exhibit presented (exhibition practices); 5) what time period is covered in the exhibit; how does this exhibit contribute to this museum; and, finally 6) how does this exhibit contribute to African American history, culture and/or identity?

Based on the literature and on initial museum visits, I also developed a host of supplementary questions such as: What is the preferred general route of the museum? Is the museum’s message still accessible without this route? Is the message dependent on a sequential experience? And, Where is the attention placed, in individual objects or through the narrative? These questions raise an important point: a certain route through the museum means that the museum experience is mediated and a mediated route suggests that the museum staff want the visitor to feel and/or experience something in particular. The question then becomes what?

**Ethnographic Accounts of the Museum: Mediating the Museum**

Given their specific focus on African American history and culture, I use the space below to provide a brief history of the three black-centered museums included in the study and their interior design—along spatial discussions. This approach investigates the features that make each African American-centered exhibit a useful case study while acknowledging the larger representational field into which they all fit. That is, given the multitude of experiences of African Americans in the United States, how/why do museums select their chosen exhibits and the imagery they project. The black-centered sites were selected in order to examine museums whose main purpose is to preserve and interpret the historical experiences and achievements of African Americans. In an effort to achieve this, it is useful to examine how the exhibits within these museums are placed.
DuSable Museum of African American History and Culture

The DuSable Museum spreads its permanent exhibits over two large floors. The route through the museum is linear, chronological, and didactic, making extensive use of written and recorded explanations, photographic images, and documents. The first half of the museum, upstairs, focuses on the African American experience using an historic narrative that covers the 17th through 19th centuries. It explains the connections to Africa (masks, drums, objects, etc.) and the pathways from Africa (middle passage, slavery, and the slave trade). Traditional handcrafted artifacts are displayed in the main hallway as a segue into understanding the African experience in America in the “Africa Speaks” exhibit, which contextualizes the museum’s message/mission. Inspecting the objects in an initial visit, I wrote in my notes: “[Africa speaks] to whom and for whom?” In the glass cases that line the wall, masks are illuminated sequentially, with miniature labels recounting their place of origin and creator.

This history is placed within a racialized perspective, highlighting the centuries of racial vision and division in the United States, through exhibits that focus on slavery, discrimination, and segregation. The main hallway splits into three different exhibition spaces that include an exhibition room on each side and a passageway that leads into the next gallery. In detailing these African American experiences, these exhibits do not enjoy the benefits of spatial arrangement. What seems like one exhibit is actually three, as each wall in the room serves as an individual display board for each exhibit. This technique allows the museum to cover a great deal of information within a limited
amount of space. Additionally, the linear approach of the room aids in the seamless transition from one exhibit to the next.

While exhibiting the different forms of racial domination instigated against Blacks, the museum uses the notion of triumph as a key representational strategy (Hall 1997) to counterbalance this point. Juxtaposed to the slavery exhibit are images of African American cultural achievement. The theme of triumph is continued across the hall in a room that exhibits the heroism and achievements of Bessie Coleman—the first African American female pilot—and the Tuskegee Airmen.

Temporary (traveling) exhibits are used as a transition between the upper and lower spaces. These exhibits move from the historical sequence used by the permanent installations to contemporary considerations as exhibited through temporary displays. A key feature of the temporary installations, which are usually housed for six to nine months, is exhibiting local history. The visitor walks through the Harold Washington wing, which celebrates the life of Chicago’s first Black mayor, in order to descend to the lower floor. The lower floor houses exhibition space for temporary exhibits and adjoins a theater, which is used for lectures, film screenings, storytelling sessions, and discussions.

The trail then leads into the largest room of the installation, containing head busts of African Americans. This exhibition space is wide open as the busts are aligned along the walls and are used to evoke the long struggle for equal rights and opportunities. There is a variety of African Americans represented with the busts, allowing one to see a small representation of the vast contributions of African Americans throughout American history.
At America’s Black Holocaust Museum, the museum experience begins by traveling through the bookstore to the first exhibit that sets the stage for the entire institution. In a large room, filled with 50 or more chairs, rests a television and videocassette recorder. The visitor is initiated to the museum’s mission through a 25-minute video on James Cameron, the museum’s founder. In the video, the visitor learns that Mr. Cameron, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith were victims of a lynch mob in Marion, Indiana in 1933. Mr. Shipp and Mr. Smith were hanged while Cameron was cut loose. In addition to this history, pictures that further detail and depict the racialized legacy of lynching in the United States flank the television set.

After viewing the video, the visitor walks to the main hallway to encounter the rest of the museum to engage a five-part series on the experience of Africans in America displayed as a historical sequence. The first three exhibits are permanent installations while the last two are temporary. The main hallway serves as the first part of the story as the walls are home to a mural entitled “An African Village.” The visitor travels through the African village and walks into the “Middle Passage: Voyage to Slavery” exhibit. The exhibit covers 10 linear feet. In descending the ship, the visitor immediately steps into a slave auction exhibit that uses a replica auction block. On the walls are pictorial representations of slave auctions—which include auction blocks and auction announcements—and slave ships. Documentation of the type, size, and destinations of various slave ships that traversed the Atlantic Ocean to deliver Africans throughout the Caribbean and the Americas are also displayed. The final two exhibits seem like one as
the visitor weaves through “Cultural Landscape of the Plantation” and “Before Freedom Came” (which was developed by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibit Service).  

“Before Freedom Came” serves as a transition from experiences of subjugation to stories of triumph, as exhibits display the African American quest for freedom through “We Want Freedom.” In the context of racial subjugation (slavery), hatred (lynching), and discrimination (Jim Crow, segregation, etc.), which foreground the museum’s story, African American triumph and achievements are also displayed in the remaining exhibits. Two of the exhibits, “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.” and “The Life and Legacy of Dr. James Cameron,” display triumph and achievement at the individual level while “African American Judges in Wisconsin” pays tribute to the professional achievements of several African Americans. These last exhibits shed light on hope (an essential feature of Dr. King’s Legacy), triumph (the story of Dr. Cameron’s life), and achievement (depicted by African American judges); all of which allow the museum’s message to shift from the devalued victim to the prevailed hero.  

Again, African American valorization is a key representational theme within these interior views and self-presentations and clearly shows the authoritarian value of controlling images and projections.

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12 SITES specializes in creating three dimensional, full-scale exhibition “packages” containing objects, photographic images, and interpretive text. Many exhibitions also include cases, freestanding display units, and computer and audiovisual equipment (www.sites.si.edu).

13 Recent scholarship that has projected the transition of the African American story include: John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans (2000); Juan Williams, Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965; and Vincent Harding, There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America.
Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture

The Anacostia Museum explores American history, society, and creative expression from an African American perspective. The Anacostia Museum’s precarious history is highlighted by its status as a Smithsonian Institute and its dislocation from the National Mall and other Smithsonian buildings. The Museum is located in southeast Washington, D.C.—a mostly Black, racially segregated quadrant of the city—and bordered by the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers.  

Since its inception, the Anacostia Museum has encouraged African American artists (and exhibitioners) to use elements of their everyday lives as subject matter. Additionally, the museum makes room for work by local artists, which are weaved intermittently with works by more prominent twentieth-century artists—such as Charles Smith. It has exhibited products from local artists such as the “On Their Own: Selected Works by Self-taught Artists” exhibition, which ran from January 2004 through June 2005. Using paintings, sculptures, drawings, and collages of “found objects,” the show explored the impact of six artists who bring bold notions and new ideas to the African American aesthetic. Topics range from visions and historical events and objects drawn from their immediate surroundings (exhibited in the main exhibition space). The museum lobby functions as an exhibition space and introduction to the museum. 

At the Anacostia Museum, the surrounding community and history is inextricably part of the museum’s impact. The museum consists of four large exhibition spaces.

14 According to the 2000 U.S. census, the area is approximately 92% African American, 5% white American, and 1% or less Asian, American Indian, or another race.  
15 This exhibition showcased the work of Chris Clark, Simon Jackson, Mary Proctor, Sam “The Dot Man” McMillan, Gregory “Mr. Imagination” Warmack, and Ruby Williams.
which can be manipulated to become two large spaces, and houses several gallery areas for exhibits that focus on artifacts and objects.

**Summary of the Study**

The remainder of this dissertation is spread across four substantive chapters. In the next two chapters, I focus on two exhibiting dilemmas that have fragmented the representational strategies of the black-centered and mainstream museums, and investigates how they influence and interact with local culture. Chapter Four uses Africa as a point of departure to investigate issues of cultural consumption and cultural authenticity. The chapter focuses on two key issues: first, what is the “place” of Africa in American museums and, second, what is the “place” of Africa in negotiating African American identity instituted in museums. Chapter Five examines the dynamics of visual displays that focus on slavery. It traces the historical roots of slavery’s transformation from a taboo subject to it being educationally and culturally important. Once omitted from history texts, institutions like museums now tell the stories of slavery. Visual displays depicting slavery in museums can be viewed as mechanisms by which cultural memory is induced as a tool for making meaning for audiences of all generations. Chapter Six focuses on the Civil Rights Movement and the methods employed in exhibiting this historic moment. I examine the representative images of the movement to investigate how they are articulated through collective identity and collective memory strategies. The chapter centers on three focal points: how selected images defined the movement; how these images are tied to historic (memorialized) events; and, the role these images and events play in articulating African American collective identity.
Chapter Seven concentrates on theories and practices associated with culture, identity, and representation. Using a single exhibit as a case study, I examine the many ways that mediated representations (paintings, photographs, films, fashions, and everyday objects) both shape and are shaped by the concepts, values, and meanings that constitute cultural life in contemporary urban societies. The concluding chapter summarizes the findings and extrapolates beyond this research to discuss the complexities of representations that museums use to inform and articulate identities.
CHAPTER 4

THE PLACE OF AFRICA IN AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUMS:
NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND THE USE OF CULTURE

In this chapter, I focus on representational strategies used in two black-centered museums to define and display cultural and ethnic identity. I use these museums as sites for projecting images of identity and as a prism through which to investigate identity work. I begin by asking, “How is the historical narrative in museums coded for identity; more specifically, how is the African American narrative coded within Black-centered museums?” This chapter examines how the Du Sable Museum and the Black Holocaust Museum affirm national identities within the cultural landscape. As mentioned previously, there is scant literature within sociology regarding African Americans and museums and, more specifically, there is very little discussion about how Black-centered museums create and/or negotiate national identity. As institutions of interpretation, museums both create (reify) and examine (through tools of interpretation) the ideas and objects they select and present. This chapter considers how museums consciously and unconsciously create an interpretative framework for national identity.

Drawing from theoretical and empirically based literature, as well as my own field research, this chapter explores Africa as a “racial project” in black-centered museums (see Omi and Winant 1994). In particular, I focus on Africa as a
representative tool for African American identity, thus becoming a symbol for collective memory. Davis and Handy (1999) contend that media representations play an important role in informing the ways in which we understand social, cultural, ethnic, and racial differences (1999:367). Even further, the tension between chosen identities and given identities appears in a stark form in African American history. Du Bois’ (1994 [1903]) “double consciousness” expresses how blacks embrace their national identity in hopes of future returns to their racial group. However, we have very little empirical evidence about how this concept works in visual representations. Since most African Americans choose a dual ‘black and American’ identity over a ‘black only’ or ‘American only’ identity (Tate 1984), we need to know more about how they manage their dual identity within cultural institutions.

In summary, in this chapter I argue that the use of Africa as a representational tool and as a cultural link has been both subjectively and selectively defined in these two museums. While the use of Africa in black-centered museums relies heavily on cultural construction, its mere presence in the museum is part of the larger African American counter-narrative and serves as an essential “racial project” in rearticulating and re-imagining African American identity. To point, African American identity has been socially constructed primarily by the one-drop rule of race in the United States, which suggests that a person with any trace of African ancestry is considered black. However, as seen in the changing nomenclature of African Americans, race and ethnicity are two key building blocks of identity. The change from black Americans to African Americans was a rational choice to supplant previous notions of a purely race-based identity. This
change is coupled with museum exhibition practices in black-centered museums in
general, and the DuSable and Black Holocaust Museums specifically, in projecting
African American identity.

**Placing Africa**

A boom in cultural or heritage tourism reflects the growing interest in the African American experience. African American communities across the nation have a long history of creating institutions to preserve their history. In addition to those included in this dissertation, several notable museums include the National Afro-American Museum in Wilberforce, Ohio, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, the California African American Museum, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, and the African American Museum in Philadelphia. As Falk (1995) has noted, two key factors that influence African American’s decisions to visit museums are the institution itself and cultural/ethnic factors. Museums are not passive institutions; their actions and the public’s perception of those actions influence who visits and who does not visit (1995:42).

Brunsma and Rockquemore (2002) argue that over the course of U.S. history, many social scientists have been primarily concerned with the question “Who is black?” making it possible to designate a population that could be tracked and studied (for example, see Davis 1991). According to these authors, framing the discourse in this way enabled an examination of the underlying racist assumptions used to categorize individuals, while allowing for descriptive analyses of how a brutally marginalized group
of people experienced the social world. As researchers interested in process, structure, and identity (as well as from the standpoint of validity concerns) Brunsma and Rockquemore contend that the more salient question is: What does black mean? The former question, “Who is black?,” invokes the power of social structure and racist ideology in establishing strict parameters of identity options available to individuals (Brunsma and Rockquemore 2002:76). Throughout U.S. history, African American racial identity has been legally, and later culturally, determined by the one-drop rule. One of the main questions that this dissertation seeks to answer is: How is African American identity constructed and represented in museum exhibits? In answering this question, I relied on analyzing how museum exhibits projected African American identity and which elements of African American history were used.

Exhibiting Africa

While the first half of the Du Sable Museum focuses on the African American experience using an historic narrative that covers the 17th through 19th centuries, the fourth stop, “Africa Speaks” is a central exhibit of the museum. The opening label informs the visitor that the main goal of this exhibit is to showcase the diverse peoples, cultures and countries in Africa, but more importantly to illustrate the link that African Americans have to their ancestral legacy beyond the institution of slavery. To make this point, the museum relies on objects (masks, drums, etc.) and the pathways from Africa (middle passage, slavery, and the slave trade) to explain the African American connections to Africa. Traditional handcrafted artifacts are displayed in this large, open
space as a segue into understanding the African experience in America, which contextualizes the museum’s message/mission.

In the “Africa Speaks” exhibit, African artifacts are displayed in eight different glass cases along the walls and in four other cases located in the center of the room. There are six objects exhibited in the first glass case, with these descriptors:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>object:</th>
<th>tribe:</th>
<th>country (made in):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>doll</td>
<td>Mossi</td>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kneeling figure</td>
<td>Yoruba</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pipe</td>
<td>Banum</td>
<td>Cameroon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>figure (#1)</td>
<td>Sherbro</td>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>figure (#2)</td>
<td>Pende</td>
<td>Zaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>figure (#3)</td>
<td>Akan</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The materials that the objects were made of and the object’s probable functions are included in the captions for these objects. Inspecting the objects in an initial visit, I wrote in my notes: “[Africa speaks] to whom and for whom?” A variety of artifacts are located within the other glass cases; the artifacts are illuminated sequentially, with miniature labels recounting their place of origin and creator. In another glass case, the label for three artifacts read as follows:

Qustal, Nubia
Sudan, North Africa
Ceramic Bowl
A-Group (c. 3000-2500 BC)
baked clay
On loan from Oriental Institute Museum 24048

Igbo (or Ibo) People
Nigeria, West Africa
HELMET MASK (AGBOGBO MMUO, MMO, or MMAMMOWO), 20th Century Wood Paint
Du Sable Museum 538143

Senufo People
Ivory Coast, West Africa
USHEBTI, OSIRID
26th Dynasty (Late Period: 712-332 BC)
Faience
Loan from Oriental Institute Museum 14094

These objects are a representative sample of the eight glass cases included in this exhibit of statutes of persons and animals, masks, chairs, and other artifacts. A detailed label accompanies each of these objects. As Baxandall (1991) asserts, labels are not, properly speaking, descriptions of the objects to which they refer. Rather, they are interpretations that serve to open a meaningful space between the object’s maker, its exhibitor, and its viewer, with the latter given the task of intentionally, actively, building cultural translations and critical meanings. From the labels provided here, it is clear that the visitor is not afforded great insight about the object but rather is provided with information so that one can locate the object to Africa.

At America’s Black Holocaust Museum, the main hallway serves as the first part of the story as the walls are home to a mural entitled “An African Village.” This mural depicts life in a village on the coast of West Africa. Civilization, family and common customs are highlighted in this exhibit, giving visitors a view into the rarely shown images of a great culture and people. Here, again, the visitor feels Africa “speaking” to and through African Americans. The mural depicts a mother, father and two children engaged in family work. There are no prominent physical features other than brown faces and bodies; this suggests the availability of this African family to connect with any African American.
As a point of museum design, the visitor must first travel through the “African Village” in order to experience the rest of the exhibits. Similar to the DuSable Museum, this is an important design for the museum to establish two key points: first, African American history did not start with slavery; and, second, African Americans are connected to Africa in several important ways such as family ties, cultural practices, and family orientations.

In reflecting on this exhibit, I pondered the place of Africa in black-centered museums. I immediately recalled Countee Cullen’s poem “Heritage” and thought of the series of questions that he posed. The opening stanza reads:

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?16

“What is Africa to me?,” Cullen’s main question, continuously rang through my head as I visited the black-centered museums for this research. In viewing the exhibits, I was struck particularly by where Africa was “placed” within the museum. At the DuSable and the Black Holocaust Museums, Africa was a central feature and a key component of the experience for visitors wishing to better comprehend the African American experience. Further, the name of the DuSable exhibit itself, “Africa Speaks,” has both an

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explicit and implicit meaning. That after being colonized, misappropriated, stereotyped and denigrated, Africa will no longer be silent or perhaps silenced. The utility of Africa is manifold; on the one hand, Africa is used as a racial project to (re)affirm African American cultural identity while on the other hand the museum’s use of Africa is clearly an example of symbolic practices where meanings are carried through African signs and images. The racial projects coming out of the social movements of the 1960s (Civil Rights, Black Pride & Black Power movements) are central to the struggle for human rights, dignity and social justice. By valorizing Africa, a hyphenated pluralist identity is achieved through the mere display of artifacts and an identity of empowerment is reaffirmed through historical memory.

**Africa Speaks**

In the DuSable Museum and the Black Holocaust Museum, the role of Africa is a central feature of the museum’s focus on history and culture and its construction of identity. Society at large has positioned Africa as part of the distant past; one in which contemporary African Americans were so removed that its mention was labeled as divisive and served to negate black heritage. Surely, Africa does not have the same meaning for everyone. At these two museums, however, collective memory is specifically constructed by using Africa as a cornerstone for African American identity.

The choice of Africa is not arbitrary. Africa, or rather the representations that produce shared memories, is a paradigmatic case for the relation of memory and modernity. Key in this regard is Waters’ (1990) notion of ethnic options in which she maintains that available options for African Americans are limited severely. In museums,
however, these limitations are counter-balanced by carefully constructed images and racial/ethnic projections. To point, every ethnicity in the United States has recognized their tie to the motherland; however, social, cultural and educational institutions are key sites in which historical memory is contested. African Americans use Africa and other racial projects in the process of remembering and historical memory. Halbwachs (1992) makes a distinction between social memory and historical memory. Social memory is the memory of things that one has experienced personally and that the group of which one is a part has experienced. Historical memory, on the other hand, and the one that is most useful here, is memory that has been mediated. As a result, Africa becomes an experience mediated by representations. Rearticulating identity is produced through transforming old identities, from Black American to African American and the consumption of African cultural heritage.

Cultural memory as a representational strategy is important in the use of Africa in black-centered museums; Assman (2001) asserts that cultural memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance). Cultural memory preserves the store of its unity and peculiarity.

_Africa Speaks to Whom?_

Many African Americans have argued that they are part of a much larger community whose shores necessarily extend far beyond those of the Americas. In addition to the museum exhibits sampled here, this perspective is evident in the work of such figures as Martin Delany and Marcus Garvey who argued that Africa is the
homeland of all peoples of African descent. In dealing with many of the injustices faced in America, Garvey was prompted to begin his famous campaign to restore all Blacks to what he considered their rightful “motherland,” Africa. Garvey quipped, “Africa for Africans” (see Redkey 1969). He rationalized this mode of thinking by attaching African American identity to a territorially-bounded locale. He asserted that, “The Negro must have a country and a nation of his own” (Barksdale 1997). Much like the connections made by the “African village” and the “Africa Speaks” exhibits, Garvey argued that there was a “natural” connection between the two groups.

This was also prevalent throughout the Black Power and Black Liberation Movements in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. Race in the United States is concurrently an obvious and complex phenomenon. The racial categories used in census enumeration have varied widely from decade to decade. Racial/ethnic labels play an important role in defining groups and individuals who belong to the groups. This has been especially true for racial and ethnic groups in general and for Blacks in particular. Smith (1992) notes that white society strictly controlled blacks and sought to shape and regulate black status and consciousness. The absence of Africa in mainstream museum’s articulation of African American identity is case in point.

Over the past century the standard term for Blacks has shifted from “Colored” to “Negro” to “Black” and, more recently to “African American.” The changes can be seen as attempts by Blacks to define themselves and to gain respect and standing in a society that has held them to be subordinate and inferior (see Sanders Thompson and Akbar 2003; Smith 1992; Martin 1991). The variation of names both reflects and in turn shapes
racial understanding and dynamics. It establishes often-contradictory parameters of racial identity into which both individuals and groups must fit. How one is categorized and how one chooses to identify are two separate components of identity formation. The determination of racial categories and identification is an intensely political process. Viewed as a whole, the census’s racial classification reflects prevailing conceptions of race, establishes boundaries by which one’s racial “identity” can be understood, determines the allocation of resources, and frames diverse political issues and conflicts (Omi and Winant, 1994). According to Smith (1992), the main goal of the switch from Black American to African American was to give blacks a cultural identification with their heritage and ancestral homeland. It was also seen as broadening society’s perspective about blacks and placing them in a global perspective (1992:507).

*Africa Speaks for Whom?*

As initially constructed in the pan-African political ideologies of scholars such as Delaney (1968), Garvey (1923), Du Bois (1994), Padmore (1956), and others, what identified the universe of African and African-descended peoples (the African Diaspora) were two essential features. First, the notion of color as prescribed by/within the U.S. racial taxonomy subjected racial interpretations to phenotypic constructions. As noted earlier, the “one-drop rule” defined any person with any known African ancestry as Black. Both blacks and whites embrace this overly broad definition, which is peculiar to the United States (see Davis 1991). Second, outside of “racial” Blackness for these intellectuals, membership in the Black world was determined by common experiences. Loosely viewed, these experiences included subjugation and marginalization of African
descendants based on racist ideologies (Gordon and Anderson 1999). The Pan-African Congress and the Garvey Movement were both harbingers of growing “race-consciousness” among both African and African American peoples. 

Later, scholars such as Herskovits (1990), Fanon (1963) and others recognized the problematic status of race as an analytic category and focused on culture as the key element in the analysis of the Black world. Herskovits, for instance, argued that blacks in the United States had retained African cultural elements. Furthermore, Herskovits insisted that the eradication of misunderstandings about African and African American cultures was necessary to “endow” blacks with confidence. As a result, the African Diaspora became conceptualized not simply as a racial entity but as a cultural community dynamically uniting Africa and its communities in displacement through commonalities of African cultural practice and worldview. Similarly, Fanon argues that the rediscovery of African identity is directed by the secret hope of discovering “beyond the misery of today… some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others” (Fanon 1963:170). These types of arguments provided the theoretical underpinning for the Black Arts Movement of the 1970s, and were furthered by the nationalistic Afrocentric scholarship (see Asante 1988; Ani 1994) that rearticulated African Americans’ conceptualizations of their identity as based in African culture.

Even in contemporary discussions, where the social construction of identity has taken root, writing the African Diaspora calls for a re-articulation and re-examination of past debates. Scholars such as Scott (1991), Appiah (1992), and Hall (1988) argue that
prominent theories of Black cultures and identities rely on forms of racial or cultural essentialism that collude with Western understandings of race, culture, and nationalism. As a result, post-colonial theorists have turned to the notion of hybridity for resolution to these problems in theorizing the Black Diaspora. Young (1995) concludes that culture and identity are inherently unstable. Similarly, Hall (1994) contends that contemporary national and ethnic politics negate the conditions of displacement and mixing through which diasporic identities and cultures have been formed. Mercer (1994) produces a theoretical version of diaspora as hybridity that places even less emphasis on the search for identity in territorial, cultural, or racial origins.

_Africa Speaks About Whom?

In the DuSable Museum and the Black Holocaust Museum, the connections to Africa are clearly stated by both the presence of African cultural artifacts and passing through the African village. In the DuSable Museum, the handmade and traditional African artifacts exhibited in “Africa Speaks” lend cultural authenticity to the museum and their “place” in the museum plays an important role in establishing an African cultural connection to (and with) African Americans. Similarly, the African Village of the Black Holocaust Museum shows the routes—and roots—of Africans in America. Both museums use a linear approach through these permanent exhibits to establish a foundation for understanding the African American experience in an historical perspective. The museums show, contrary to what has been propagated in the past, that African American history did not _begin_ with slavery. The African Village, in particular, allows for a discussion of what life was like in Africa _prior to_ the deportation of Africans
throughout the New World. This is a significant educational initiative, especially for children and young adults who might have been taught otherwise (see Zinn 2003; Loewen 1996). What is evident in these two institutions is that in the process of projecting African American identity and using Africa in this identity work, the museums underwent their own racial projects.

The use of Africa in black-centered museums is an important representational strategy. In many important ways, it is not so much how the identity of African Americans is imagined and maintained, as it is how the identity at black-centered museums is imagined and projected. To a large degree, the construction of a collective identity is essentially an act of constructing and reconstructing the past. Moreover, the essence of inclusion is the act of official recognition. Recognition of identity—group or individual—is essential to the formation of one’s identity. Similarly, the lack of recognition, or the misrecognition of identity, bars the path of the development of collective identity.

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves (Taylor 1995:249).

The primary arenas in which the act of memory construction takes place are symbolic. The images triggered by the symbols cumulatively make for the memories of the collective past. Commonly, one encounters monuments, museums, holidays, and the like, which stand for, or symbolize, some event of heroism or disasters, which are
presented as central to the collective’s history. In the course of analyzing these images, what is symbolized is as significant as what is not symbolized.

Race, ethnicity, and culture are three of the basic building blocks of identity. Through the construction of race, ethnicity, and culture, individuals and groups attempt to address the problems found in boundaries and meaning. As argued in the analysis presented here, identity is best understood as a dynamic, constantly evolving property of both individual uniqueness and group organization. The construction and representation of identity and culture are the result of both structure and agency—a dialectic played out by identity groups and the larger society. While race is a socially constructed phenomenon (van den Berghe 1967), ethnicity is the product of actions undertaken by ethnic groups as they shape and reshape their self-definition and culture (Nagel 1994). In addition, ethnicity is constructed by external social, economic, and political processes and actors as they shape and reshape ethnic categories and definitions.

Summary

A key finding in this investigation is the socially constructed aspects of ethnicity; the ways in which ethnic boundaries, identities, and cultures are negotiated, defined, and produced through social interaction inside and outside ethnic communities (Nagel 1994). According to this constructionist view, the form of ethnicity reflects the creative choices of individuals and groups as they define themselves in ethnic ways (1994:152). The activities of many African American groups that mobilized during the civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States are clear examples of the construction and

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reconstruction of history and culture in order to redefine the meaning of ethnicity.

During these years, a renewed interest in African culture and history and the development of a culture of black pride—“Black is Beautiful”—accompanied African American protest actions during the Civil Rights Movement. The creation of new symbolic forms and the abandonment of old, discredited symbols and rhetoric reflected the efforts of African Americans to create internal solidarity and to challenge the prevailing definitions of Black American ethnicity.

Here, Gans’ (1979) notion of “symbolic ethnicity” is useful, as it is characterized by a nostalgic allegiance to a cultural homeland that is marked by cultural pride. In rearticulating black American identity to African American many institutions, such as black-centered museums, used Africa as a symbolic identifier for ethnicity. At the Du Sable Museum, Africa was used as a prism to communicate an African American cultural and historical legacy. First, in placing “Africa” before slavery, the point of the exhibit was very clear: African American history did not and does not start with slavery. In fact, according to the “Africa Speaks” exhibit, African American history and connections to Africa date back to and is connected with dynasties as early as 2500 BC and spans throughout the continent.

The use of Africa in projecting African American identity is an example of the dynamic, creative nature of ethnic culture, and reveals the role scholars and institutions play in cultural construction. The reconstruction and study of cultural history is also a crucial part of the community construction process and again shows the importance of academic actors and institutions in cultural renewal (Nagel 1994). The reinvention of
Black America from the Civil Rights Movement and through institutions such as museums paved the way for Africa to be used as a racial project. Black Americans wanted to authenticate their African heritage, a heritage that goes beyond skin color and nominal kinship ties. The African nexus is articulated through cultural practices, organizations and institutions; and, more specific to this study, we see how this connection serves as a symbolic basis for group identity through collective memory (Koonz 1994; Schuman and Scott 1987). Black-centered museums resisted a hegemonic interpretation of history that posited African Americans as peripheral onlookers as opposed to their active involvement. Furthermore, the use of these museums has been a key vehicle in reinterpreting African American cultural history, renewing cultural symbols, and reconstructing ethnic and racial identity.

Omi and Winant’s (1994) concept of “racial project” is defined as “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines.” These projects result in “linkage[s] between structure and representation,” which in turn are components of the “socio-historical process[es] by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” known as “racial formation” (1994:55-6). The re-articulation of black American identity can be understood as a racial project in that the process intended to make sure that Africa and black Americans remain forever linked in the American consciousness. More importantly, this racial project required institutions such as Black-centered museums to produce particular and specific culture/identity work that would tie these two together. As researchers note, we construct culture by picking
and choosing items from the past and the present (see Nagel 1995). For black-centered museums, the decision to incorporate Africa in the [re]naming of African Americans and in connecting black Americans to the cultural legacy of Africa was an important choice. Culture provides the content and meaning of ethnicity; furthermore, it authenticates ethnicity by providing a history, ideology, symbolic universe and system of meaning (Nagel 1995). As demonstrated within this dissertation, African American identity has been in constant negotiation throughout the history of Africans in the United States.¹⁸

And, just as important, museums have become major participants in contemporary efforts to construct culturally shared, historically anchored representations of self (see Katriel 1993). As argued here, black-centered museums produce several racial projects in articulating African American identity that range from cultural identity (the use of Africa) and historical events (slavery) to social movements (Civil Rights Movement, Black Pride and Black Power Movements) and historic moments (the great migration). The object of these racial projects is to empower African Americans through the use of historical memory; the discursive framework is simultaneously in negotiation and confrontation.

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¹⁸ Kelly (1993) discusses efforts of ethnic groups to transform a common ancestry into a common ethnicity.
CHAPTER 5
EXHIBITING AND REMEMBERING SLAVERY

The way slavery is exhibited is a site of contention over how the shameful history of slavery in the US is to be remembered and its lineage to present-day conditions. Exhibits that focus on slavery have varied in size and scope, and have been received with varying degrees of fanfare. The focus of slavery exhibits has ranged from slave ships and plantation life to uprisings and Maroon societies. All of these exhibits have benefited from historical, preservationist, and archaeological efforts that have offered insight into American attitudes about slavery and race in the 17th century and beyond. Mainstream museums have just recently begun to incorporate African and African American enslavement as part of the American story. Much of this is a result of continued diversity efforts and has benefited from a current thrust on the national level to not only exhibit slavery but to institutionalize it by establishing several sites, including a museum on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.¹⁹ For instance, the New York Historical Society extended their “Slavery in New York” exhibit through March 2006 while the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization’s “From Slavery to Freedom”

¹⁹ Ruffins (1998) notes that the idea of an African American museum on the Mall surfaced over a ten-year period between 1984 and 1994. One of the main questions that the advisory committee had to consider was the presentation of slavery, which has been interpreted as a holocaust in many African American circles.
exhibit was presented in four different languages and shown in twelve different countries.
In addition, the “Reflections on American Slavery” exhibit at the University of Mary Washington attracted more than 1,600 people—about four times the number who attend most gallery shows. In reflecting on the exhibit a visitor wrote, “This is our American Holocaust and we deny it, causing its legacy to continue. We need to recognize this history fully in order to start to move beyond. Thank you for this beginning.”

Similar exhibits have been displayed at colleges across the nation. In 2002, Sweet Briar College housed an exhibit on 19th Century Slave Life in Amherst County while a student’s exhibit at the University of Georgia focused on St. Simon’s Plantation and slave community. At the Warren-Trumbull County Public Library in Warren, Ohio, the “Nurturing Pathways to Freedom in Trumbull County” exhibit was established to give the community a glimpse into the historical realities concerning local anti-slavery sentiments from the 1820s to the 1850s. But, as scholars have noted, the study and display of slavery is still an emotionally charged issue in the United States (see Patterson 1977; Elkins 1975). Yet, there are still unresolved issues stemming from slavery’s racial injustice and America’s deficient reconciliation. These prevailing issues resonate in contemporary discussions of such controversial issues as affirmative action and reparations.

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21. Although neither of the arguments has been settled, if they can be settled at all, a few recent studies are noteworthy for their advancement of the debates. Cahn (1995) presents contributions on both sides of the highly charged affirmative action issue. More recently, Katznelson (2005) argues that the origins of affirmative action were actually devoted to preserving a strict racial hierarchy where whites received the full benefit of rising prosperity while blacks were deliberately left out. Robinson (2000) and Winbush (2003) argue that reparations are necessary for rectifying present damage done by the U.S.’s slave holding
The memory of the past is a construction subject to negotiation and debate; it is not a settled or ‘fixed’ entity. In fact, some pasts never achieve a final historical form, but may be subjects for constantly renewed arguments (Zolberg 1996). Investigating exhibits that focus on slavery in Black-centered museums illuminate many of the challenges and opportunities inherent in exploring the distant past in American museums, from addressing such thorny questions of race to examining the discursive formations of identity in America. To understand why the selected sites exhibit slavery, it is important to know the discursive frameworks, historical relevance, and significance of this event, as well as its place in the struggle for racial equality and racial identity in America. More important, exhibits that focus on slavery are a reminder that slavery is not just a part of African American history but a story that should have meaning for all Americans.

This chapter provides an analysis of the representational strategies that are employed by Black-centered museums to manage the history and legacy of slavery and the presence of those enslaved. These museums provide key sites to explore counter-narratives of enslavement. After examining representations in Black-centered museums, I concentrate on exhibits found within the mainstream museums. The consideration of Black-centered sites allows us to examine a previously neglected area of popular culture and therefore shed a different light on contemporary understandings and representations of race and racism than is found in the extant literature on race in the United States.  

22 Omi and Winant’s (1994) racial formation perspective provided a theoretical alternative to mainstream idealist approaches to race by highlighting the socio-historical process of racial categories. Rather than
This work also demonstrates how Black-centered institutions construct narratives of U.S. history that valorize the African American experience. I also demonstrate how these sites contribute to a very particular collective memory and, by extension, collective identification that engages the national dialogue of contemporary inequalities.

The role of collective memory will be explored as well by considering the different methods of representation of African American slavery in selected museums. Eichstedt and Small (2002) contend that 83% of plantation museums in the South employ either symbolic annihilation or trivialization/deflection as their main rhetorical strategies in representing slavery. In sum, most of the plantation museums depict slavery through the lens of white genteel society. This study, while very informative, was limited by its geographic scope in that it only considered plantation museums across selected Southern states. Eichstedt and Small’s research examined museum sites in Virginia, Georgia, and Louisiana. The authors note that there were several reasons for this choice, which included the number of people enslaved in each state, the crops that were grown and the attendant methods of production, and the current presence of plantation museums (Eichstedt and Small 2002:65).

Exhibiting Slavery

Reading the past is never a simple matter, even when the events composing it are agreed upon by most who try to decipher it. Zolberg (1996) contends that events themselves are only some of the ingredients that history comprises, and they rarely stand in pristine solidity, but are fished out from many tangled occurrences. Once chosen, their significance, and their relationship to other events may still not be immediately evident, viewing racism as an all-powerful ideology. Bonilla-Silva (1997) has recently argued for a structural approach to understanding racism, which is based on the notion of racialized social systems.

23 Eichstedt and Small’s research examined museum sites in Virginia, Georgia, and Louisiana. The authors note that there were several reasons for this choice, which included the number of people enslaved in each state, the crops that were grown and the attendant methods of production, and the current presence of plantation museums (Eichstedt and Small 2002:65).
but require interpretation. Similarly, Ruffins (1992) notes that there are different ways of remembering and interpreting the past, using different pieces of evidence and distinct methods of recovery. In the case of exhibiting slavery, while there is agreement about certain facts, its representation as an integral component of American society remains in dispute.

A cross-cultural examination of museums shows that there is disagreement on how slavery should be presented—when it is exhibited at all. In mainstream museums, as pointed out by Eichstedt and Small (2002), symbolic annihilation and trivialization and deflection are the main rhetorical strategies used in depicting African American slavery. These strategies work to privilege the experience of whites as the “normal” American experience, which has the effect of valorizing white genteel society while simultaneously erasing the experiences of those enslaved. Additionally, in ignoring slavery and those enslaved, these mainstream museums also denigrate the contributions of African Americans. There were two exhibits on slavery at the mainstream museums used in this study; both of the exhibits suffered from some form of trivialization and deflection. The exhibits were not focused on slavery themselves, but fell under the umbrella of a “broader” scope that happened to contain elements of slavery. At the Chicago Historical Society, slavery was drowned under the “Great Man” perspective as the exhibit focused on America during Abraham Lincoln’s presidency while slavery was included in an examination of three communities of change at the National Museum of American History. Although the National Museum’s exhibit was extensive, it was not a stand-alone
exhibit and proved difficult to locate while perusing through the museum’s brochure (one has to literally find the exhibit within the larger exhibit in order to view it).

The Black-centered sites used in this study offer a necessary corrective to the partiality and distortion of mainstream museum sites. Their common motivation is to tell a far more inclusive story of American history and slavery, one that has African Americans at the center of the narrative. They offer a challenge to the dominant stories told in other museum sites, particularly mainstream museums, and in the American educational system generally. For this study, I use Eichstedt and Small’s (2002) research agenda as they argue that the rhetorics employed by Black-centered sites are part of a racialized regime of representation that seeks to confront the symbolic annihilation of slavery prevalent throughout mainstream museums. Instead of trivializing, deflecting, or erasing slavery from the American story, these Black-centered sites frame the institution of slavery and the experience of enslavement within the tropes of survival, resistance, and dignity. Additionally, these interior views of the African American past have helped to increase diversity in historically white museums (Eichstedt and Small 2002).

The primary goal of this chapter is to understand how Black-centered museums reflect, create, and contribute to racialized ways of understanding and organizing the world. My argument is that racialization processes work in various locations, linked by shared and often over-lapping ideologies and representations, to produce and reproduce narrations of racialized inequality and oppression. Exhibits found at the museum sites selected for this study will inform the analysis presented below.
Slavery Exhibits at Black-Centered Museums


“Middle Passage: Voyage to Slavery,” America’s Black Holocaust Museum, Milwaukee, WI. Permanent.

“Cultural Landscape of the Plantation,” America’s Black Holocaust Museum, Milwaukee, WI. Permanent.


Analysis of Exhibits

The Black-centered museums have three main exhibition goals: educate audience/public of the African American experience, inform visitor perspectives of African American contributions to American society, and provide an historical context for contemporary views of the American racial discourse. These three goals are intersected in the telling of the African American story. As mentioned earlier, the trivialization, neglect, and/or erasure of slavery in mainstream museums (and other resources) has created a gap in the experiential knowledge of African Americans. Omitting enslavement from the African American experience not only facilitates an incomplete story, but it also promotes a distortion of any contextual understanding of that experience. Many of the challenges that African Americans faced throughout the 19th and 20th centuries—such as citizenship rights, equal protection under the law, and voting
rights to name a few—were derivatives of their enslavement. As such, any retelling of the African American story that fails to consider this experience necessarily distorts the current landscape of African American affairs. Black-centered museums have responded to this representational slight by bringing slavery to the forefront of their audiences. In doing so, Black-centered museums have contended with such thorny issues as the forced migration and racial subjugation of Africans in the Americas. Without these perspectives, not only is the African American story incomplete and distorted, but so too is America’s.

In analyzing exhibits that focus on slavery at Black-centered museums, their intent covers four main themes. First, exhibits are designed to depict the hardships of slavery, which speaks to the horrors of enslavement. Second, exhibits seek to personalize slaves, identifying them as humans rather than property. Third, museums depict African American agency by identifying individuals and groups who worked against slavery and enslavement. Finally, exhibits display customs and lifestyles to give voice to the cultural achievements produced during and maintained after enslavement. These museum intentions work to create a context for exhibits that not only hold human interest but also extend understanding.

*Physical Hardships*

In displaying the hardships of slavery, the exhibits directly confront the brutality, inhumanity, and exploitation of those enslaved. The exhibits use slave ships and articles/objects used during enslavement as their two primary means of depicting the physical hardships of slavery. The use of slave ships is a key rhetorical strategy that
negates and problematizes any attempted argument for the humanity of slavery. First, the
slave ships help to conjure images of the psychological and physical trauma experienced
by Africans who were stolen from their homes. Second, they serve as useful tools in
creating a picture of shipboard life and the practices of the slave trade. Finally, slave
ships help to memorialize and recognize the courage, pain, and suffering of enslaved
African people.

Slave ships allow discussion of both the pre-slave existence and the “preparation”
for becoming a slave. Additionally, slave ships also promote awareness and discussion
of the legacy of the middle passage—the journey from African shores across the Atlantic
Ocean to the Caribbean and the Americas. A diagram within the “Captive Passage”
exhibit illustrates how slaves often were placed on ships: stretched out, side-by-side, with
each slave’s head to the feet of his or her two neighbors. The practice enabled captors to
save space and crowd more slaves into each ship. With the high rates of disease and the
encompassing stench, most Africans found the living conditions aboard the slave ships to
be immensely intolerable if not fatal. Both the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade and
the result of the cruelty in building America’s prosperity are on display at the exhibit. It
includes images of terrified African captives throwing themselves into the sea.  

The “Middle Passage: Voyage to Slavery” exhibit is a 15-foot reproduction of the
cargo hold of a slave ship, which gives museum visitors a first-hand perspective of the
space allotted to slaves. The exhibit taps into human sensibilities and encourages viewers
to sympathize with those enslaved. A textual reference informs visitors that while many

24 For discussions of slave ship conditions see Spears (1970) and Clarke (1994); for first-hand narrative of
slave ship conditions see Equiano (1967).
ships were suitable to hold 300 slaves, many carried upwards of 600. The museum uses several posters of slave ship cargo holds to illustrate this point. In the “Slavery: America’s Shame” exhibit, a miniaturized slave ship replica is used in conjunction with posters for a higher-level visual effect. The exhibits also educate visitors on the common hazards of the voyage including scurvy and gangrene, both of which stemmed from poor diet and close confinement. Dehydration, caused by lack of drinking water and high loss of bodily fluids from fevers or dysentery, was a primary killer aboard the slaving vessels (see Kiple and Higgins; Klein 1969).

In addition to slave ships, museum exhibits display articles and objects used during enslavement to depict how slaves were brutalized physically. These objects include iron shackles, fetters, whips, and special chisels designed to knock out the teeth of slaves who tried to starve themselves to death so they could be force-fed. Several of these objects are displayed in many of the Black-centered museums and a few even have historical documentation of the items in use. For instance, the DuSable Museum uses the slave collar, a cast-iron device designed for slaves who were captured after attempting to run away, to illustrate physical hardships. These devices were created as a physical impediment; they forced slaves to turn their entire body in order to turn their head, which made any future attempts at running away rather difficult. A further example is the slave pen photographs at the Anacostia Museum; these historic artifacts serve as an important symbol of the world of the slaves and also as a reminder of the economic benefits of slavery. Textual sources note that the slave pen was used as a “warehouse” where slaves were held before being moved further south for sale. In this exhibit, visitors are cued to
the internal slave trade, nationally and regionally. This allows for a discussion of the impact of slavery in both the North and the South, in addition to the development of slavery throughout the 18th century. Williams (1996) notes the capitalistic ventures of the slave trade, which provided an economic foundation for a large-scale international trading network (the famous molasses, slave, and rum triangle that later included cotton). Fogel and Engerman (1995) challenge the traditional assumptions about the material condition and management of slaves, their work habits, domestic welfare, and the economy of the antebellum South in general.

In presenting the tools used for bonding slaves and depicting their plight on slave ships, museum exhibits clearly problematize the institution of slavery. As the beginning points of their American slavery experience, museumgoers are informed of the intensely calculated injustices that Africans faced as their introduction to American society. As the exhibits further demonstrate, these injustices continued well into the 21st Century.

**Humanize Slaves**

A key representational strategy for slavers was to portray slaves as inhuman. This was not only important in justifying slavery but it also worked to maintain racial subjugation of African Americans. Throughout slavery’s existence in the United States, slaves were considered property, which ultimately meant that they had no citizenship rights. Black-centered museums document this through textual sources that include

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25 This line of research not only points to the profitability of slavery in general, but provides a basis for exhibits to depict the economic benefits of slavery that accrued to owners and agencies and their subsidiaries and predecessors.

26 In fact, in the 1857 Dred Scot decision, the U.S. Supreme Court maintained that African Americans could not be U.S. citizens and had none of the rights of citizens.
slave advertisements from colonial newspapers and solicitations to purchase slaves. All of the museums reviewed in this study used these textual sources to show the inhumanity of slavery. After stepping off of the deck in the “Middle Passage” exhibit, the Black Holocaust Museum uses a replica auction block to further emphasize the horrors of enslavement. In addition to the textual sources listed above, the museum also displays several inventories of property, which lists the slaves belonging to the estate of slavers at their death. This historic narrative provides insight into the first two stages of enslavement in America: the voyage across the Atlantic and the selling of slaves.

Museums counter-balance the portrayal of slaves as property by displaying those enslaved as human beings. This is represented in exhibits as in two ways: naming and personalizing.

By providing names, museum exhibits help to identify those enslaved as people rather than as property. A common practice of slavery was to strip those enslaved of their identity by replacing their African names with Anglo and/or Christian ones. Additionally, slaves were given the surname of their masters to identify them with those by whom they were owned. In essence, a slave’s first name was inconsequential to his/her personhood as they were ultimately identified by their surnames.\(^\text{27}\) The museums, however, seek to negate this practice by identifying those enslaved individually by name. The introduction to Du Sable’s “Amistad” exhibit is an eight-foot high board that quotes

\(^{27}\) Frederick Douglass (1982) makes this point in his autobiography. After escaping into freedom, he changed his slave name of Bailey to Douglass so as to give himself a “new identity” as a free person. This is indicative as many slaves were adamant in their rejection of an owner’s name. However, Inscoe (1983) identified several reasons for slaves retaining their master’s name; such as religion, family, and attachment. For instance, many slaves kept their names as it was also the name of either one or both of their parents, thus making identification with family a primary reason for its continued used.
“All We Want is Make Us Free!” and lists the African captives of the *Amistad*. This listing of 32 adults, four children, and six who perished in New Haven (CT), and the mention of the eleven captives that died at sea presumably seeks to make a human connection with the audience. As a brief textual listing of Africans who were captured during the height of slavery in America, the implied intent is to make human those who were considered less than human. By providing their [African] names, and “naming” them as both subjects and victims, the exhibit pulls at the very fabric of an American colonial history that seized, nullified, and remade many African identities. However, the identification of slaves should not be limited to a lexicon of names, but instead can be used as a context of genealogy and kinship that can uncover some of the significance that names may have held for the slaves themselves. This approach provides a means to examine several dimensions of life as a slave, such as who is responsible for naming the slaves, what factors influenced the choice of names, and how kin networks functioned within slave communities.

In addition to naming, museum exhibits work to personalize those enslaved in terms of individual agency and through concepts of human qualities like family

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28 There are several slave narratives that deal with this issue, two vivid accounts are *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vass, the African*, by Olaudah Equiano and *Roots* by Alex Haley. Haley’s account deals with the issue of identity and renaming through the character Kunta Kente. Haley shows the struggle of Kunta, the African, to retain his identity and the slave system’s fierce desire to “remake” the African as one of the more subversive features of slavery.

29 Gutman (1986) pioneered this approach in his study of North American slave family and kinship patterns. He argued that slave naming practices can provide “evidence about what slaves believed, how Africans and their descendants adapted to enslavement, and especially how enlarged slave kin networks became the social basis for developing slave communities.” Cody (1982, 1987) suggests that slave names give insight into the development of a distinct historical consciousness: “the selection of an African ‘day-name,’ for example, would give a child a name used solely by blacks in the community and would serve as a reminder of an African past. Sharing a kin name was a useful device to connect children with their past and place them in the history of their families and communities.”
organization. The museum exhibits work to personalize those enslaved through depicting human characteristics such as feelings, emotions, and ideas. This is an important strategy in enlivening the enslaved with human characteristics, much in the same way that is done in slave narratives—excellent examples are provided in Brent (1973), Douglass (1982), and Equiano (1967). The tendency of visitors to read slavery as happening in another place and another time could easily become a reading of slavery happening to others, removed from time and distance. In highlighting human characteristics, these exhibits seek a human connection by closing the distance between those who were enslaved and the visitors. Property does not feel, it has no emotions, and it cannot produce ideas. In depicting human characteristics, the museums provide quotes and mini-narratives, present examples of behavior, and even promote personalities.

In humanizing slaves through naming, depicting human characteristics, and presenting the slave community, the museums offer an alternative form of narrative about lived experiences and an often neglected past.

*Triumph: Working Against Slavery*

One of the overarching themes of exhibits that focus on slavery in Black-centered museums is triumph. In examining the museums used in this study, two distinct portrayals of African and African American triumph include resistance to enslavement and identifying African American freedom fighters.

Slave resistance was an unending part of the Middle Passage and life on the plantation. Black-centered museums depict revolts that took place on slave ships as well as on plantations and throughout American society. On slave ships, slaves used both
subtle and band resistance. Slaves subtly resisted their enslavement by refusing to eat, throwing themselves overboard, or committing suicide. Band resistance tended to be more organized and planned as many slaves united and staged uprisings aboard slave ships (see Bly 1998). Much has been written about slave insurrections at sea (Karenza 1993; Jones 1987; Greene 1944), with some revolts garnering attention as individual exhibitions; for example, Du Sable Museum’s “Amistad” Exhibition. On the plantation, as articulated in the “Cultural Landscape of the Plantation” exhibit at Black Holocaust Museum, many African Americans fought against bondage by stealing from their owners, escape, arson, even homicide. The exhibit also explains that they broke tools, injured work animals, and pretended to be ill in the field or on the auction block. As a last resort, some committed suicide. Some slaves and free blacks tried to use the courts, publications and other means available in white society to improve their condition. They petitioned Congress, presidents and legislatures. The basic premise of these exhibits, however, is the defiance with which runaways and resistors fought against the system and their willingness to extricate themselves from bondage. Runaway slave advertisements in museum exhibits document the persistence with which many enslaved

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30 The DuSable Museum hosted “The Hale Woodruff Amistad Murals and The Amistad Children by Rene Townsend” during the summer and early fall of 2003. The exhibit ran in conjunction with a 21-day visit of the Freedom Schooner Amistad, which was docked at Chicago’s Navy Pier. This exhibit will be further discussed in Chapter 7, “The Place of Amistad in American Museums.”

31 Franklin and Schweninger (1999) assert that slaves were in a constant state of rebellion with their masters. They argue that the intense circle of violence between blacks and whites was marked by property sabotage, work stoppage, assault, murder, and escape into the North. Similarly, Aptheker (1983) provides a scholarly account of the slave’s consistent war against American slavery, which included the day-to-day resistance, the formation of maroon societies, and all out slave rebellion.
African Americans sought their freedom. Additionally, Black-centered museums depict these acts by noting the legacy of resistance within African American communities.

The DuSable Museum used a panel exhibition, “Creativity and Resistance: Maroon Cultures in the Americas,” to highlight the significance of the Maroon communities as a source of resistance. The Maroon communities represented a reality and possibility of self-determination and agency to other enslaved Africans. Since the sixteenth century, Maroons established hundreds of communities throughout the Caribbean and the Americas, ranging in size from small groups to powerful kingdoms with thousands of members. “Creativity and Resistance” focuses on the contemporary Maroon peoples of Jamaica, Suriname, French Guiana, and the Seminole community along the United States/Mexico border. The exhibition combines the voices of the living Maroons with those of their ancestors to emphasize links between Maroons past and present. Early Maroon communities were comprised of people from diverse African cultures who banded together to resist recapture and survive in the deep forests, swamplands, and jagged terrain. Maroons drew on a full range of resources, integrating African, Native American, and European elements to develop new societies and shared languages suited to their demanding environment. The exhibit clearly indicates that the contributions of Maroon societies to the overall process and legacy of African/African American resistance stands out and must be recognized (see Franklin and Schweninger

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32 “Creativity and Resistance: Maroon Cultures in the Americas” is a traveling exhibition developed by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Services (SITES) that brings to light a little-known chapter in the history of the African Diaspora. SITES adapted “Creativity and Resistance” from an exhibition developed for the 1992 Smithsonian Folklife Festival that coincided with the Columbian Quincentenary.
Additionally, exhibiting slave resistance is an important facet of portraying African and African American agency during enslavement. While mainstream media depicted runaways and other Black insurgents as fugitives and/or villains, Black-centered museums have been important in showing African Americans as freedom fighters. Individuals such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, Sojourner Truth, Gabriel Prosser, and Denmark Vessey are valorized as key contributors in dismantling the slave system; which is quite contrary to many notions of the political victories that brought supposed freedom (James 1989; Bennett 1988; Harding 1981).

Harriet Tubman receives special attention in museum displays as she is labeled as the “Moses of her people” as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Black-centered museums provide a brief synopsis of Tubman’s heroism by noting her own escape from slavery and her 19 returns in helping more than 300 other slaves run away to freedom. The Underground Railroad was a wide network of escaped and freed slaves in addition to anti-slavery sympathizers and other abolitionists that extended into Canada. Several exhibits describe the Underground Railroad’s basic structure, geography and functioning and also showcases leading figures like Tubman and Douglass. In addition, the exhibits introduce individuals who, though less-well known, made important contributions to the system.33

33 Individual slices of the Underground Railroad are shown through specialty museums such as the Slavehaven/Burke Estate Museum in Memphis, TN. These museums not only serve as reminders of the horrors of slavery, but they also portray the assistance of many antislavery activists in harboring slaves on their journeys to freedom and assistance in abolishing slavery. The extensive network of the Underground Railroad spreads across most of the South into northern cities and even into Canada. The National Park Services’ National Register lists over 60 sites, including private homes, churches and business buildings.
Additionally, Black-centered museums depict African Americans who participated in such important historical events as the American Revolution and the Civil War. The depictions posit African Americans, both those who were free and those enslaved, as harbingers of American values such as patriotism and courage. Depicting these African American values is not so much to show African Americans on a comparative basis vis-à-vis whites, but more so to display their ultimate quest for freedom and equality. In this regard, museums have used individual activists and groups, such as abolitionists, the Buffalo Soldiers and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, as major contributors to this history. While many of the well-known activists are used, the museums also exhibit lesser-known—and even unnamed—slaves as contributors to the African American quest for freedom.\textsuperscript{34}

Depicting triumph for those enslaved works to establish a sense of pride in African American history, show African American achievements, and depict agency of African Americans. Depicting triumph is not merely a pretense to African American valor, but gives voice to the long legacy of African American heroes since the colonial period and links them to those in the twentieth century, such as the Tuskegee Airmen, Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and many other civil rights activists. Landmark historical events also fall under this scope, such as Thurgood Marshall and the 1954 \textit{Brown v. Board} decision, Jackie Robinson and the integration of major league baseball, and the Greensboro (NC) sit-in just to name a few.

\textsuperscript{34} Harding (1981) provides an important contribution to identifying the lesser-known freedom fighters.
Creating and Continuing Culture: African American Achievements

Museum exhibits identify dances, narratives, music, language patterns, and spiritual beliefs as the most distinctive cultural achievements and survivals of enslavement (see Blassingame 1979). Textual sources explain that African and American cultural practices melded together to establish a “new” African American culture.35

Within Black-centered museums, textual sources inform visitors that slave religious and cultural traditions played a particularly important role in helping slaves survive the harshness and misery of life under slavery. Many slaves drew on African customs when they buried their dead. Conjurors adapted and blended African religious rites that made use of herbs and supernatural powers. Slaves also perpetuated a rich tradition of West and Central African parables, proverbs, verbal games, and legends. They retained in their folklore certain central figures. Although conveyed through textual means, these are important educational notes for visitors. For instance, slaves sustained a sense of separate identity and conveyed valuable lessons to their children through folklore. Much of the folklore derived from similar African stories, which told of powerless creatures who achieved their will through wit and guile, not power and authority. These exhibits emphasize the intermixing of cultures as enslaved peoples had to create a culture of their own to communicate with each other, as they came from a

35 Stuckey (1987) explains how different African peoples interacted on the plantations of the South to achieve a common culture. He argues that slaves still remained essentially African in culture, at the time of emancipation, revealing an intrinsic Pan-African impulse that contributed to the formation of the black ethos in slavery. Similarly, Palmie’s (1995) edited volume includes essays that probe the continuities of cultural processes across the historical threshold between slavery and freedom.
wide variety of African culture groups. Many elements from their African cultures were incorporated into this African-American culture.

Additionally, maintaining the African family was a form of both cultural resistance and cultural achievement. Division and selling of family members, breeding practices, and the denial and restriction of family operated against a viable and durable African American family. Yet, as scholars have noted, the Black family survived and was quite functional in caring for its members (see Blassingame 1979; Genovese 1977). This is also noted in such exhibits as “Cultural Landscape of the Plantation” at the Black Holocaust Museum, which uses both textual presentations and historic photographs. The photographs display home life and work in slavery—showing images of the craft skills of slaves and their personal lives. The mundanity of family life, plus the absence of any effort to dramatize it, allows visitors the possibility of seeing it as ordinary, as related to everyday human activity. In addition, the visitor’s connection to them is direct in another way: many of the functions of family life are things that we have all experienced and not just seen. Depicting family work not only makes human connections between visitors and the enslaved, but it also allows for discussions of the slave community and cultural practices such as marriage, religion, and childcare.

As part of the “Captive Passage” exhibit, visitors are (re)introduced to various African American cultural products created during the slavery era. Artifacts such as a candle stand and a bureau with a mirror made by North Carolina cabinetmaker Thomas Day are on view to document the fact that this free black man owned and operated one of the largest furniture-making businesses in the state during the early 1800s. An engraving
of the U.S. Capitol depicts one of many contributions made by African American slave labor. A portrait by former slave Joshua Johnson; poems by the young enslaved African Phyllis Wheatley; and an almanac created by scientific pioneer Benjamin Banneker, the free son of a former slave, are some of the many African American contributions highlighted in the “Legacy” portion of the exhibit.

Much of the cultural history of enslaved African Americans has been preserved and found by a recent thrust in African American archaeology. According to Samford (1996), archaeology can help guide and refine the questions historians ask of their data. Likewise, archaeological findings, combined with the rich ethnographic literature on African cultures and African American folklore, provide a key thrust in preservation efforts that museums ultimately rely on. As Singleton (1995) has noted, the interpretation of the archaeological record of slavery can help to pronounce key themes, such as living conditions under slavery, status differences within the plantation community, relationships of planter dominance and slave resistance, and formation of African American cultural identity.

Representations of Slavery in Mainstream Museums


Analysis of Exhibits

According to the museum’s brochure, “Communities in a Changing Nation: The Promise of 19th-Century America” explores the nation’s history through the experiences of three different communities: industrial workers and managers in Bridgeport, Connecticut; Jewish immigrants in Cincinnati, Ohio; and slaves and free blacks in the
low country of South Carolina. The exhibit is constructed as three exhibits in one and uses a combination of artifacts, photographs, illustrations, and personal recollections to reveal the challenges, successes, and constraints faced by the people of these communities in their pursuit of freedom, opportunity, and equality. The section on slaves and free blacks in the low country of South Carolina is entitled “African Americans in Slavery and Freedom: PromiseDeferred.”

The exhibit can be overlooked on a visit to the museum as it is located in a corner on the second floor and is disconnected from much of heavy traffic within the museum. Museum personnel estimate that visitors spend about 90 minutes in the museum and hope that the museum either can pique the visitor’s attention so that they see the majority of the museum or that the museum will inspire a return visit. The museum’s exhibits are placed within any historical continuum, which means that all exhibits (and pertinent museum staff) compete for high traffic areas to receive the maximum viewers possible. As expressed earlier, museumgoers make choices about the exhibits they see; these choices are influenced by a myriad of factors. The “Communities in Change” exhibit is potentially overlooked by museumgoers because of its location while the “African Americans in Slavery and Freedom” portion can be missed due to its inclusion in a tripartite exhibit.

“African Americans in Slavery and Freedom: Promise Deferred” includes many of the same representational strategies as the Black-centered museum exhibits previously cited within this chapter. The exhibit is divided into five sections with each explaining particular segments of slavery in general and/or slavery as it pertains to the South
Carolina low country. The goals of the exhibit are to portray a localized version of slavery in the deep South, identify the ways in which both enslaved and free blacks negotiated their place within society, and, finally, provide an overall account of life at a particular historic moment—1860, just one year prior to the Civil War. Upon entering the exhibit, the visitor quickly learns that while much of the promise of American life was based on the labor of slaves, slavery severely restricted and often denied black American’s access to that promise (of freedom). The exhibit makes an important contribution to slavery exhibits as it clearly shows and details that African Americans’ experiences in the 19th-century differed based on region, occupation, age, gender, and whether they were slave or free.

An oversized poster board serves as an introduction to the exhibit. The right side of the board is an 1860 aerial view of the city while the left side provides a numerical count of enslaved and free African Americans. This enumeration is based on 1860 census data and includes all states east of Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. Additionally, the visitor is informed that there were 40,000 to 50,000 African Americans who lived in Canada with rights to own property and vote; most returned to their families in the United States after the Civil War. The textual information provided on the poster board is important as well. The visitor learns that Charleston, South Carolina was a thriving city, home to many of the low-country’s slave-owning elite and to thousands of African Americans. In Charleston, many enslaved blacks and “free people of color” (blacks who had gained their freedom) lived, worked, and worshipped while many more labored as slaves on nearby plantations. The African American experience in South
Carolina reveals much about black American life during the 19th century. The exhibit offers an interior view, which provides insights into the violence and degradation of slavery, racism, and limits of freedom that most black Americans endured before, during, and even after the Civil War. It also reveals the resiliency of African Americans who struggled in an oppressive system that was often geared to squeeze the slave labor and the spirit out of them.

According to the exhibit, one-fifth of Charleston’s black population was free in 1820. Many free blacks were emancipated on the death of their owners—a policy that South Carolina law restricted more tightly in the years prior to the Civil War. Others “earned” their freedom by laboring extra hours in order to accumulate enough money to purchase their freedom. Most free blacks held the city’s lowest-paying jobs, which included subsistence-level day laborers, laundry women, vendors and peddlers, and “pick-and-shovel” workers. According to a textual reference within the exhibit, a few free blacks were skilled artisans such as carpenters and ironworkers and constituted the core of Charleston’s black elite. However, even Charleston’s free blacks were never free from the proscriptive laws, customs, racial attitudes, and violence of the slaveholding South. They could not escape white society’s belief that slavery was the “natural and preordained” position for all African Americans. Due to fear of the increased number of free blacks—and the fear by whites that free blacks might work to undermine slavery by encouraging slaves to run away or rebel—many white-controlled local governments throughout South Carolina severely restricted the rights of free blacks. To facilitate
enforcement, the city of Charleston required all free blacks to register annually by name, occupation, and place of residence.

The sections on the Charleston market, plantation slavery, and the slave cabin all work to provide insight to the visitor on the role of African Americans in local affairs. Each section uses pictures, artifacts, and textual displays to inform the visitor. At the market, visitors learn how African Americans participated in local economic affairs and displays how African Americans contributed to Charleston life. A life-sized mannequin portrays an African American woman at the market standing in front of an array of fruits and vegetables, flanked by poultry hanging from the wall, and surrounded by pictures. The pictures depict the Charleston market of the 19th century and provide images of blacks and whites at the market. The plantation slavery section is used to portray a distinct form of slavery that differed based on region, customs, traditions, and masters. Plantation slavery coordinates closely with Frederick Douglass’ narrative of his experiences as a slave in which enslaved black Americans were auctioned, lived in shacks, received clothing and food rations, worked sun up to sun down, and were punished routinely (see also Ball 1998). White plantation owners used various methods to maintain complete control over their slaves. Their principal method was divide and rule while other methods included creating a class system among slaves and divisions based on color. Depicting the hardships of slavery speaks to the very fabric of inhumanity in which slavery was based. Numerous slaves are pictured half-naked with numerous welts, bruises, and other physical deformities; the painstaking labor of picking cotton is portrayed—juxtaposed by Eli Whitney’s cotton gin—to give a sense of the
grueling labor that slaves endured. At the slave cabin, visitors learn how enslaved black Americans attempted to carve out meaning in their lives by depicting family life, caring for children, and family legacies. At one juncture, an enslaved family is celebrated for achieving against the odds (“The Holloways: Success Despite the Odds”). In addition to recalling the oppression of slavery, the cabin is a testimony to the harsh living conditions that enslaved blacks endured vis-à-vis white slave owners (see Otto and Burns 1983). After working in the fields all day, the slave quarters offered a hard-packed clay or dirt floor; sparse furnishings; and none of today’s amenities such as heat, electricity or plumbing.36 Yet, enslaved black Americans survived with the bare minimums of daily life.

The final section of the exhibit celebrates black Americans in their military service, which, like the Black-centered museums, highlights the triumph of African Americans. This final portion of the exhibit focuses on the Sable Arm, which was a troop of black soldiers in the Union Army during the Civil War.37 Many historians are in agreement that the enlistment of freed slaves in the occupied regions of the Confederacy transformed the status of black Americans. As the exhibit attests, blacks were not passive observers of the destruction of slavery and the exhibit is useful in portraying the differences between the ways freed and enslaved blacks behaved toward enlistment.

36 There were various types of slave cabins; some included fireplaces that were used both to heat the cabin as well as cook. Various slave cabins have been excavated, reconstructed, and salvaged as historical landmarks across the South, including locations in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, South Carolina, and Virginia. See Otto (1984) for an important overview of living conditions and status patterns in the Old South during the first half of the 19th century.

37 Cornish (1956) and Glatthaar (1990) offer two pioneering works that have studied the role and contribution of African-American troops to Union victory.
Summary: Remembering Slavery

Slavery did not challenge any injustice; it was the injustice. As a result, injustice is inherent in any exhibit that focuses on slavery. This is especially highlighted by the mediation of the museum experience as instituted by museums. This incorporates choices made by museums about what to include in exhibits. Silences, omissions, and misrepresentations speak to the hegemony that museums (and their staff) can exert over other people and cultures (see Hall 1997).

Within museums and across other social, cultural and educational institutions, there are currently complex debates about the telling of African American history, the selection of cultural images, and how African Americans should be represented. For example, is the story of black separation, isolation, and achievement against the odds the primary narrative and context for discussing African Americans? Ruffins (1998) asserts that in most African American museums, some version of this narrative is absolutely central; it fulfills African American’s need for a validating and distinctive history. However, for other Americans troubled by the history of slavery and segregation, the great narrative of African American life has much more to do with integration into and acceptance by the mainstream of American life (Ruffins 1998). This ideology has been instrumental in the selecting of images and stories presented about African American life in non-Black museums.

Casey (2003) notes that what lies behind criticism of most new museums may be summarized in three broad questions: first, what is the proper role of a museum; second, which aspects of history it is proper to include (and who decides); and, finally, how
should museums approach contested stories? In many mainstream museums, slavery has suffered from silences, social forgetting, and collective amnesia. Irwin-Zarecka (1994) suggests that collective memory and aspects of the past are forgotten by not being invoked, spoken about and remembered in the public. Silences promote social forgetting as periods or events excluded from social memory do not reach successive generations, which, in turn, involve the creation of alternative memories and different interpretations or stories of the past. Attempts to erase, trivialize, and/or deflect slavery and the enslaved found in mainstream museums portray distorted and incomplete images of America’s past. The work of Black-centered museums (and other museums of their type) is critical in the American racial discourse. These sites not only address the injustices suffered by people of African heritage, they also provide visitors with an opportunity to rethink their assumptions about race and racism. The exhibits studied here confront the hardships of slavery, treat those enslaved as people, and valorize African Americans as important agents in dismantling slavery. From these exhibits we also learn that the past is not past at all; it persists into the present. Memory and other forms of representation are framed by social contexts (Zerubavel 1996), with museums as key sites to find such contexts. And, finally, collective memories and representations perform some form of cultural work for those in the present that address such issues as community and identity (Schwartz 1996; Zelizer 1995; Irwin-Zarecka 1994).
CHAPTER 6
EXPLORING THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT:
COMPETING NARRATIVES ON DISPLAY

*Brown v. Board of Education and its defeat of the doctrine of separate but equal was a watershed in the evolution of American democracy.*
Smithsonian Institute, National Museum of American History

The modern Civil Rights Movement circulates through American memory in forms that are under continuous negotiation and debate. In this chapter, I use the Civil Rights Movement as a prism to analyze the challenges and demands of exploring and interpreting contemporary history through representations and memory. Additionally, I argue that the past matters. Remembrance is always a form of forgetting, and the dominant narrative of the Civil Rights Movement distorts and suppresses as much as it reveals (Hall 2005). Representations of the past can be mobilized to serve partisan purposes; they can be commercialized for the sake of tourism; they can shape a nation’s sense of identity, build hegemony, or serve to shore up the political interests of the state; and they can certainly influence the ways in which people understand their world (see

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Yeignst and Bunch (1997) provide a thorough analysis of exhibiting contemporary history. They use the acquisition and exhibition of the Woolworth lunch counter as a prism to analyze the challenges and demands of exploring and interpreting contemporary history and they examine how crafting this history has changed and expanded the roles and obligations of curators in American museums.
This chapter explores the many facets of the memory of the modern black freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. Memory is used here to refer to the process by which people recall, lay claim to, understand, and represent the past (Bodnar 1992). Further, as Confino (1997) notes, memory has come to denote the representation of the past and the making of it into a shared cultural knowledge by successive generations in “vehicles of memory” such as books, films, museums, commemorations, and others. Until recently, few events of the Civil Rights Movement have helped shape collective memory of the period. Certain events of the period are denoted as “key” events: *Brown versus Board of Education* decision of 1954; the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955; the Little Rock school integration crisis in 1957; the sit-ins of the early 1960s; the March on Washington in 1963; and the Alabama campaigns of 1963 (Birmingham) and 1965 (Selma). Not only does this interpretation reduce the entire Civil Rights Movement to a few key events, but also these events provide for an easy interpretation between good and evil and allow many Americans to distance themselves from the ugliness of bigotry.

African American public history arose out of the desire to foster the black community’s self-esteem and to challenge both popular and academic white racism. Stewart and Ruffins (1986) observe that African American public history reflects the changing racial strategies and cultural ideologies of the black community. Initially, African American historical collections emphasized the similarity of blacks to other Americans and the veneration of mainstream American cultural values. African American history played an important role in the effort to celebrate a distinctive black
cultural identity and educate whites to the humanity of blacks (1986:316). African American public history relied on the autonomous black community’s support in the first place because mainstream American public institutions would not support a black history that was oppositional in its basic message. During the 1960s African American public history was dedicated to raising the consciousness of the black community’s unique history and destiny (1986:327). After the founding of numerous cultural institutions, positive images of blacks and African American culture entered the mainstream of American culture for the first time. The significance of the Civil Rights Movement to African American public history was that it defined history as a tool for community empowerment. African American public history arose out of the desire to promote a positive racial identity among blacks, to preserve a history in danger of being lost, and to challenge racial stereotypes and myths pervasive in American popular culture. As Stewart and Ruffins (1986) further assert, whereas mainstream public history institutions totally ignored black history almost fifty years ago, today these same institutions have made considerable efforts to promote African American public history as integral parts of their overall programs. Within the last two decades, African American museums have emerged as important institutions concerned not only with American ideals and values but also with the relationship of those ideals and values to African Americans’ efforts to survive as a people (Fleming 1994). What has resulted is that African American history now contains two histories—an integrationist history and a nationalist history.

In recent years, museums dedicated to memorializing the Civil Rights Movement have been established in several Southern cities. These sites are places where the
meaning of civil rights is currently undergoing active negotiation. Within museums, collections have expanded to incorporate Civil Rights Movement memories across the nation. These museums share the common theme of defining the struggle of African Americans for human rights. Most importantly, this is defined as it is seen through African American eyes and shows the continued concern with the search for roots (Duffy 2001). These sites—including museum exhibitions—are important in ensuring that the struggles and stories of the Civil Rights Movement will be remembered; however, objects in the built environment serve as elements in a continuing struggle to define the contemporary significance of the movement (Dwyer 2000). It also shows who will be included and what legacies will be retold. For instance, the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee displayed social movements that were ignited by the Civil Rights Movement such as the Red Power Movement, Black Power Movement, Women’s Movement, and Gay and Lesbian Movement, allowing visitors to see the national impact of the Civil Rights Movement. Additionally, these connections show that the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement lives on today. As a major turning point in American race relations, the movement is constantly used as a reference point for judging the state of contemporary race relations (Fuller 2006). Similarly, Gray (1997) has argued that representations of the Civil Rights Movement convey contemporary political and cultural hopes, in particular, the belief that America has transcended racism. This allows a mainstream view that the Civil Rights Movement is over because it succeeded in dismantling racist structures and in guaranteeing equality before the law. However, the fight for civil rights continues and therefore memories of the movement must be kept
alive so as to avoid willful social forgetting and collective amnesia across regional location and generations.  

**Defining the Movement**

As Romano and Raiford (2006) observe, understanding the nature and significance of the historical memory of the Civil Rights Movement is especially crucial at this particular moment in U.S. history. Arguments rage about whether racism is still a force in political and cultural life in the contemporary United States. These arguments position the struggle to define the Civil Rights Movement at center stage of contemporary politics and life. This chapter analyzes museum exhibits to explore how the movement is narrated at different sites, what is missing—if anything—and why some people are not included in the discussion. From this dialogue across museums, we better understand the contests over civil rights remembrance and the heroes and protagonists that participated in the movement.

Traditionally, the master narrative frames the Civil Rights Movement as a highlight reel of key events that transpired between 1954 and 1968. This framing of the movement obfuscates the necessary context in which to fully understand the multiple sources that ignited and substantiated the movement (such as Black churches, other local institutions, and black women). The symbolic value of the Civil Rights Movement extends far beyond the master narrative. This value was the participants’ desire to dismantle Jim Crow, which segregated people by race in restaurants, hotels, restrooms,

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39 A “Civil Rights Bill” was passed in Michigan during the 2006 elections; the bill prohibits the use of race in hiring practices and educational initiatives. The bill was controversial because it was supported by the Ku Klux Klan and dubbed “Civil Rights Initiative”; the bill was proposed under the false pretense that it would provide equality.
and most other public accommodations. Racialized signs, such as “Whites Only” and/or “Blacks Only”, posted on bathroom doors and drinking fountains became the visual politics of Jim Crow. The segregated spaces of daily life (such as water fountains, lavatories, and eating counters) were more than just their utilitarian value; they symbolized to both blacks and whites the segregated world that existed throughout large portions of the United States. For whites, the segregated spaces reinforced notions of power and racial superiority while for blacks these same spaces served as a constant reminder of their second-class status and their vulnerability. The Civil Rights Movement was an outgrowth of the agency of African Americans and shows the oppositional consciousness that Blacks employed to critique American society (Morris 1999). Through marches, demonstrations, boycotts, and sit-ins, movement participants challenged the United States to live up to its democratic ideals of freedom, justice and equality.

Although there was not a clear historical moment when the Civil Rights Movement was defined, the master narrative uses several key events to narrate the movement. As a result, the movement is continuously defined and redefined. Images of the Civil Rights Movement are continuously re-circulated in films, books, museums, gallery exhibits, popular media and commercial advertising. These images commemorate a time of struggle over race, rights and significant moments in the African American struggle for freedom. Within the museums used in this study, the Civil Rights Movement has been displayed in various ways. During this study, there were seven exhibits that focused on the Civil Rights Movement; three of which were on display at the National
Museum of American History. The Du Sable Museum of African American History housed two exhibits on the Civil Rights Movement and will play host to a third exhibit during winter 2007. Each museum employed a different method in which to memorialize the movement; as will be discussed here, these commemorations are open to multiple, competing interpretations of the past.

**Framing the Civil Rights Movement**

The Civil Rights Movement is one of the most well researched social movements of the twentieth century United States. Much has been written as scholars have examined the movement from legal, historic, political, and sociological disciplines in investigating the multi-faceted impact that it has had on American society. This scope has also included narratives, biographies, and memoirs from movement participants. Yeingst and Bunch (1997) argue that the need to understand and embrace the ambiguity and complexity of America’s past, especially the more recent past, is one of the most difficult concepts for the museumgoing public to understand. They further posit that the ambiguity is reflective of the legitimacy of multiple perspectives of the past and the fluidity of historical interpretation (Yeingst and Bunch 1997). As noted earlier, African American museums partially arose to give a more accurate account of the history of Africans in America. Looking through the lenses of identity, representation, and authority allows us to interpret contemporary history in American museums.

In the recent past, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s has assumed a central place in American historical memory. Today memories of the movement are being created and maintained in a wide variety of sites, from memorials to
art exhibits, advertisements, community celebrations, legislative battles, and even street names (Romano and Raiford 2006). Each of these spaces, whether film or television, museum or tourist destination, advertisement or political speech, is engaged in the process of memorializing the movement, albeit in divergent and often contradictory ways. Dwyer (2006) has documented the production of four prominent Civil Rights memorials that are all geographically located in the South (Atlanta, Georgia; Memphis, Tennessee; and, Birmingham and Selma, Alabama). Schein (1997) refers to these sites as part of the “materialized discourses”—built environments that embed and convey meanings through their representation of social identities and their politics—while other scholars argue that memorial landscapes are shaped by and in turn influence the society that produces them (see Dwyer 2000; Foote 1997; Sandage 1993; Monk 1992; Duncan 1990). We can use Dwyer’s (2000) analysis to categorize the civil rights memorial landscape into three broad areas. First, memorial work distinguishes Civil Rights Movement participants versus outsiders. Second, it determines the civil rights time frame. And, finally, it authorizes who is worth remembering.

A Photographic Frame

At the Chicago History Museum, visitors get a glimpse of the Civil Rights Movement through the eyes of a photographer, Declan Haun. “A Compassionate Eye: The Photographs of Declan Haun, 1961-1969” exhibit celebrates the achievements of Haun during what the museum calls his “most prolific” period as a photojournalist: the 1960s. According to the introduction of the exhibit, Huan’s simple and compassionate views offer new perspectives on a decade that saw a tremendous amount of political
participation, from rallies to conventions to protests. The “Compassionate Eye” exhibit provides a biographical sketch about Declan Haun and the development of his photojournalist career. For instance, the visitor learns that in 1958, at the age of 21, Haun moved to North Carolina to join the photography department of the *Charlotte Observer* where he and his colleagues established the newspaper as a national leader in the field of photojournalism by the early 1960s. Additionally, the museum visitor is informed that Haun gained a reputation as a “people photographer” because his photographs conveyed a deep connection with his human subjects. What is clearly apparent within the exhibit is the series of choices made in developing the exhibition; curators made thousands of choices about which photographs and supporting artifacts to include that would best describe the photographer’s work during the 1960s and would also shed light on this tumultuous period in American history. While the exhibit has a much broader scope, I am particularly concerned with Haun’s coverage of the Civil Rights Movement.

Figure 6: Girl at Rally
The “Compassionate Eye” exhibit is divided into seven sections that begin with the early years of the decade to Haun’s views of the South in a more reflective approach as a culmination of the period. One striking photograph of the decade’s early years (1961) is the “Girl at Rally” image, which depicts a young African American girl with an American flag at a community parade in Charlotte, North Carolina (see Figure 6). The young girl’s gaze is directly into the camera, thus making a human connection with Haun (the photographer), and is juxtaposed by the presence of the American flag (which she holds in her hand). The American flag is a national symbol that invokes both collective identity and collective memory. The girl’s display of the American flag enchants a legacy of dreams longed for by African Americans—the well-documented history of the anti-slavery, racism, Jim Crow, and discrimination movements attest to this—along with the symbolic power of equality and justice for all. The photograph is clear and powerful; it demands the viewer to [re]consider the black experience in America and represents a national appeal to the potential, dreams, and hope that generations of African Americans have held and continue to hold. The long deferred dreams of full citizenship and equality are portrayed along with a reminiscence of Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. In his speech Dr. King said, “I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” His dream was to give children—like the girl picture here and other oppressed black youth—the opportunity to realize their own dreams.

This image not only represents the dreams of the young girl pictured, but also the need to change American society. The juxtaposed American flag serves two purposes.
First, it reinforces that this is the face of all African American children, not just the girl pictured here. Secondly, a certain significance can be read into the flag’s partial covering of her face. It shows how American society ignores part of her, or, as Ralph Ellison articulated, makes her “invisible.” The flag physically hiding her represents society hiding her under its ideas of what she should (or should not) be. Langston Hughes once asked, “What happens to a dream deferred?” The melancholy eyes of the young girl pictured seem to ask this same question. In his poem, Hughes goes through a series of possible options before ending with the query, “or does it explode?”

The “Struggle for Justice” section includes three powerful images of 1963 that include the March on Washington (D.C.) for Jobs and Freedom; the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama; and the church service at the Sixth Avenue Baptist Church in Birmingham for the four young African American girls who died in the bombing at the sixteenth street church. These three images show the ebbs and flow of the movement: peaceful protests to secure rights that full citizenship guarantees (the march), the catastrophic effects of racial hatred and why the movement was necessary (the bombing), and the motives that sparked the fire of activism in many civil rights participants (the children). Without the captions it could be difficult to decipher the events captured in the photographs; the captions not only provide details to the visitor, but also show the constructed nature of choices made by museum staff in selecting particular pictures.

The “Struggle for Justice” section provides a dichotomous view of hope and conflict of the 1960s. Haun’s assignment in Birmingham was to capture community response in the aftermath of the bombing; The “Broken Church Windows” image (Figure 7) is a powerful reminder of the Birmingham campaign. The picture resounds with shattered hopes and dreams and the resiliency of African Americans and civil rights participants. The March on Washington and the bombing brought unprecedented media coverage to the Civil Rights Movement and garnered support for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The final picture in this section not only shows King, but it also captures other prominent leaders of the civil rights campaign in Ralph Abernathy, prominent within the Southern Christian Leadership Council, and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, leader of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. All three men delivered eulogies at the joint funeral for victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing.
Another stop on Haun’s travel was Selma, Alabama in 1965. Here, Haun captures a woman singing outside the Dallas County Courthouse where law enforcement officers had violently attacked 600 civil rights activists, preventing them from marching to Montgomery (caption reading). Here, again, the woman symbolizes hopes and dreams but also characterizes the peaceful protest employed by civil rights participants. None of the African Americans captured in Haun’s photographs are engaged in physical activity; instead, they are shown actively engaged in the struggle: marching, singing, congregating, or other forms of peaceful protest. A lasting image in the “Trouble at Home” section of the exhibit, Haun captures white civil rights counter-demonstrators in Cicero, Illinois (see Figure 8: Chicago Counter-Demonstrators). The image is important for two reasons: first, it shows that racism, discrimination, and equal rights were not geographically-specific to the Southern states; and, second, it helps to make the Civil
Rights Movement of local interest in showing how people participated during the 1960s. The counter-demonstrators are not very different from their Southern counterparts who wanted to stop integration and, among other things, argued that integration was both illegal and communist (see Figure 9: Southern White Counter Demonstrators).

Figure 9: Southern White Counter Demonstrators

In 1966, Dr. King brought the Civil Rights Movement north to challenge Chicago’s residential segregation; King initiated open housing marches through the city’s white neighborhoods. After facing violent resistance in Chicago’s Marquette Park, King commented that he had “never seen so much hatred and hostility on the part of so many people” (caption reading). In the “End of the Era” section of the exhibit, Haun documented the close of the decade through his continued work for national magazines. In 1968, he covered Martin Luther King Jr.’s funeral in Atlanta, Georgia. While King’s dream lived on, millions mourned the loss of the man who, in his own words, struggled “to redeem the soul of America” (caption reading).

Through Haun’s photographic lens we experience the 1960s through the lives of many individuals. The “Compassionate Eye” exhibit with the young African American
A girl holding the American flag reminds us of the children interviewed by Dr. Kenneth Clark in his educational experiments that helped bolster the NAACP’s Linda Brown case (Brown v. Board of Education); the Little Rock Nine; the four girls at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church; and the millions of other African American children whose lives were changed because of the Civil Rights Movement. The exhibit moves on to cover some of the highlights of the civil rights campaign with the March on Washington, Birmingham, Selma, and, finally, King’s death. Along the way, the visitor gets a glimpse into the movement’s northern entanglements as King protested residential segregation in Chicago.

Photographs are an important form of communication that raises two important questions: what do the subjects of the photograph represent and for whom? As Griffin (2004) has argued, the past is especially salient as both memory and as historical significance. The “Compassionate Eye” exhibit allows visitors to consider how social movement photography mobilizes present-day memories of the Civil Rights Movement. First, it provides a photographic record of various moments within the movement that can be detailed by subject, content, context, and location. Additionally, the photographs allow us to interrogate civil rights memory; it allows us to discuss space, place, and participation (see Raiford 2006; Griffin 2004). The camera/gaze takes an image out of time. By freezing the moment within a frame, it memorializes that event. Omi and Winant (1994) argue that the Civil Rights Movement struggles of the 1960s radically transformed the social and political geography of racialized meanings in the United States. There are many possible readings of photographs—especially the ones discussed here; these readings are specific to a particular moment and historically transcendent. For
photographs of the Civil Rights Movement especially, memory is never an end in itself. Representations of the Civil Rights Movement matter today, for the past is inevitably filtered through the present.

*The Smithsonian Institute’s Frame*

The Smithsonian Institute’s exhibits on the Civil Rights Movement frame the movement by focusing on the years between 1954 and 1965. Using a collection of exhibits housed in a large exhibit room, the movement starts with the “Separate is Not Equal: Brown v. Board of Education” exhibit that focuses on the landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision that helped end segregation in public schools and, according to a textual reference within the exhibit, was a turning point in the history of race relations in the United States. The exhibit begins with the visitor walking into a replica segregated classroom similar to the ones found in the South; the classroom has three rows of three chairs—two of the rows have chairs with desks attached while the third row has small bench seating with no desks (see Figure 10: Separate is Not Equal).

Figure 10: Separate is Not Equal
A sizable picture within the exhibit portrays how a classroom looked during the time period; students sit on flat benches along two walls holding their papers in their laps. There are no desks—not even a teacher’s desk; a fireplace unit sits in the middle of the room and obscures the view between the teacher, who stands in front of the class, and several of the students. This portion of the exhibit allows the visitor to feel the physical space of segregation and imagine its impact as it clearly depicts the paucity of resources available within black schools during the time period. There are several smaller pictures used in the exhibit to further the point that segregation denied black students educational equity. The exhibit shows that the Brown case was not a singular case and it did not occur spontaneously but, like most victories within the Civil Rights Movement, was a result of challenges and protests that began many years before. A textual reference within the exhibit acknowledges that the Brown case grew from the legal victories of Sweat v. Painter and Mclaurin v. Oklahoma; the impetus of both cases was to challenge the legal precedent of the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case in which the “separate but equal” doctrine was established. As Justice Warren concluded in his dissent, segregation is inherently unequal.

The main thrust of the exhibit is to examine the decision’s impact on contemporary society and challenge visitors to explore what social justice means today. However, while the exhibit tries to frame society before and after the Brown decision, the Brown case stays in the forefront of consciousness. The exhibit is a multimedia presentation as it includes personal stories, artifacts, images, and video presentations. The personal stories give voice to African Americans affected by segregation while
artifacts and pictures of the learning conditions (such as classrooms and one-room school houses) clearly portray the injustice and neglect of African Americans. These mediums are used to provide a holistic representation of the struggle for social justice before and after the Court’s ruling in the *Brown* case. The classroom set-up within the exhibit not only allows visitors to visualize educational experiences of African Americans during the time period but it also allows them to see how people achieved against the odds. The theme of triumph is the key representational strategy of the exhibit.

In July 1960, the Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, NC was desegregated. The lunch counter symbolized Jim Crow and the institutionalized machinery of segregated space that was rampant in the South. Although it was not the first time that the sit-in strategy was used, the Greensboro sit-in was significant because it was a sustained and visible student protest that allowed the media to disseminate this story to the nation. Additionally, according to Yeingst and Bunch (1997), the success of this direct-action campaign garnered more support for the Civil Rights Movement as more Americans saw that it was possible to achieve change. Furthermore, the Greensboro victory ignited a youth-led movement to challenge injustice and racial prejudice.
The exhibit, “Sitting for Justice: The Greensboro Sit-in of 1960,” explores the event through the eyes of the participants and examines its impact in 1960. The exhibit was designed to introduce museum visitors to the recent struggle for racial equality in America and uses the actual lunch counter as artifact within the exhibit. The Woolworth lunch counter stands as a powerful symbol of the segregated world that existed throughout large portions of the United States (see Figure 11). For whites, it reinforced notions of power and racial superiority while it simultaneously served as a constant

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41 On February 1, 1960, four African American students sat down at the Woolworth’s lunch counter and politely asked for service. When asked to leave, they remained in their seats. Ezell A. Blair Jr. (now Jibreel Khazan), Franklin E. McCain, Joseph A. McNeil, and David L. Richmond were all enrolled at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro (Exhibit brochure).
reminder of second-class status and vulnerability for blacks (Yeingst and Bunch 1997).

Though centered on the sit-in, the exhibit places the moment within the context of the Civil Rights Movement. The exhibit, both through its location in the building and by its interpretive posture, allowed the museum to place this racially specific episode squarely within the mainstream of American history.

After highlighting a few key events, the exhibit concludes the movement with the “Selma to Montgomery: The 40th Anniversary of the Voting Rights March” exhibit that focuses on the march for and the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The exhibit is small—encompassing just a glass case—but informative. First, it informs visitors of the widespread voting rights discrimination against African Americans in Southern states. Second, the exhibit provides information about the 25,000-person, 54-mile Selma March orchestrated by various civil rights organizations that brought national attention to their struggle. And, finally, it acknowledges the march’s impetus for the increased political pressure that led to the signing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

According to the Smithsonian Institute’s exhibits, the Civil Rights Movement occurred between 1954 and 1965 and was anchored by two legal statutes in the Brown v. Board of Education case (1954) and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Although the Brown exhibit gave mention to the challenges that African Americans faced prior to 1954, the exhibit uses the Brown case as the significant event that sparked the Civil Rights Movement. The movement is then framed by presenting “key” events that are either of national notoriety such as desegregation standards or had a national impact in that they encompassed wider participation in the movement.
There exists today a dominant narrative of the movement’s goals, practices, victories, and, of course, its most lasting legacies; this dominant narrative focuses on the triumph of tolerance as the appropriate legacy of the Civil Rights Movement. And, as Rogers (1988) notes, many museums and practitioners often settle for an elitist interpretation of social change; and, this impact on civil rights memory has narrowed its scope and produced two competing perspectives. This consensus of memory offers that the “Civil Rights Movement” began in 1954 with the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and ended with the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (or the Open Housing Act of 1968). Framing the beginning and end points of the Civil Rights Movement around these two legal landmarks neglects the protests and demonstrations before and after. For instance, the trailblazing *Brown* decision was the culmination of a decades-long legal struggle by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to chip away at the legal underpinnings of segregation, first by targeting the most egregiously unequal situations and then using the language of those precedents to make a frontal assault on the principle of segregation itself (Festle 2005). Similarly, the Washington, DC boycotts, picketing, and sit-ins from 1950 to 1953 clearly prefigured the goals and tactics of the late 1950s and 1960s. Additionally, African American struggles to hold a series of rallies at the Lincoln Memorial between 1939 and 1963 constituted a tactical learning experience to the strategies of nonviolent action used
throughout the movement (see Sandage 1993; Jones 1982). Thus, there is a need for a greater sociological (and historical) imagination and, as Eagles (2000) notes, students should be increasingly dissatisfied with the standard 1954-1968 scenario. Narrowing the focus of the Civil Rights Movement to a 14-year period lacking historical context and does not allow the audience to better understand Depression Era work by such prominent figures as Ida B. Wells and A. Phillip Randolph, or the rampant conditions that led to continued black protests. It also neglects the internal struggles for movement ideology, and the role of women, churches and local organizations in providing leaders and training. These are significant oversights given that these organizations provided safe spaces for participants to organize (see Dwyer 2006; 2000). For instance, the Deacons for Defense and Justice rarely receive any mention in the master narrative. The Deacons were an armed group of African American men founded in 1964 in Louisiana to defend their constituents and community and protect civil rights workers from acts of white violence prevalent throughout the South at the time. Hill (2004) notes that the Jonesboro chapter initiated a regional organizing campaign and eventually formed 21 chapters in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama; they were also instrumental in forcing the federal government to enforce the 1964 Civil Rights Act and neutralize the Klan.

In addition to the 1954-1968 time frame of the movement, Dwyer (2006; 2000) observes that two perspectives have dominated civil rights representation: one that

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focuses on the “Great Man” school of thought and another that places emphasis on African American agency. The “Great Man” school of historiography emphasizes elite-led institutions and their leaders rather than organizers and participants and valorizes the national at the expense of the local. This perspective is used at the Black Holocaust Museum. In a photo exhibit on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the exhibit portrays major events that took place in the life of the civil rights leader. Here, not only is King embodied as the cornerstone of the movement, but this reductionist approach even denigrates his contributions and significance to a select set of “major” events. King’s shifted focus on poverty in the late 1960s and his criticism of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War are not mentioned at all (see King 1967). By focusing on the national story, visitors can glimpse only a selected version of King’s story; thus, King’s legacy is simultaneously elevated and diminished.

The second perspective examines African American agency by reconceptualizing the Civil Rights Movement as multiple black freedom movement struggles. Additionally, it moves away from the elitist interpretation by narrating tensions between national and local aspects of the movement and by focusing on grassroots organizations that are often overlooked and marginalized within the dominant narrative (see Dwyer 2000; Morris 1984). The Du Sable Museum used this perspective in its “A Right Given But Denied” exhibit.

This dominant narrative of the movement persists, though alternative memory traditions are coming to the foreground by way of memoirs, films, and museums. Such narratives beg us to ask what is at stake in these dominant representations of the past. A
central component of memory is the dialectic between remembering and forgetting. What kind of Civil Rights Movement is produced through this consensus memory and what vision of the past does it help legitimize, valorize, or condemn? This dominant narrative implicitly suggests that the civil rights struggle is finished, that after the inclusive laws there is no more civil rights struggle or struggles that carry on that legacy. The struggle for equality during the Montgomery bus boycott, the Freedom Rides, the sit-ins, and the March on Washington symbolized the struggle to achieve the American dream. Fleming (1994) argues that the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were clear victories for the Civil Rights Movement and for the American ideals of freedom, justice, and equality for all Americans, which was reflected in the Smithsonian Institution’s exhibit.

The competing narratives expose inconsistencies in what is considered as the appropriate civil rights story to tell as only sterilized versions of leading figures are put on display. The recent canonization of Martin Luther King Jr. ignores his evolving radicalism in the middle 1960s (Rogers 1988). For example, Harding (1987) has argued that the image of Martin Luther King Jr. perpetuated in collective public memory has been effectively sterilized, made non-threatening and harmless by ignoring King’s struggles against poverty, his critique of capitalism, and his attack on American foreign policy (Morgan 2006; Hall 2005; Harding 1987). Much like Angela Davis is defined primarily by her afro, King is revered publicly for his nonviolent, integrationist rhetoric, as often quoted from his “I Have a Dream” speech. Although he gave more substance to America’s blank check to African Americans, the speech has been reduced to national
harmony (with its hope that one day little white children and black children would hold hands) and race neutrality (they can be judged on the basis of their character rather than their skin color), an interpretation that drains the substance of King’s work and very rarely is represented in exhibits. This “let’s get along” syndrome not only put racial differences aside, but in fact, assuaged a line of thinking that argues for us to do away with race-based interpretations. The process of turning Martin Luther King into a national icon, according to Harding (1987), has required a massive case of national amnesia about what King really stood for; he has been detached from his own politics and their more system-critical implications (Morgan 2006).

Our memories of the movement can also play a critical role in shaping our personal, group, and political identities. According to Gillis (1994), identity and memory depend on each other; the core meaning of any individual or group is sustained in large part by remembering a particular past, which helps us both locate ourselves and make sense of the world in which we live. Memories of the past, and especially of an event like the Civil Rights Movement, can also provide “rhetorical resources” to support a variety of different political agendas (see Rosenberg 2003:2). Therefore, interpretations of the past are key to understanding contemporary politics.

**Politicizing the Present**

As Morris (1999) notes, the impact of the Civil Rights Movement on race relations and the nation’s social fabric has been monumental. This pivotal movement has had significant influence on social movements in a wide array of countries. The intent here is not to provide a detailed account of the modern Civil Rights Movement as such
accounts are available in the vast literature that has emerged over the last twenty years (e.g., Robnett 1997; Garrow 1986; Morris 1984). Having previously stated its prominence, the purpose here is to present an analysis of how this movement has been represented in museum exhibitions and examine the different historic moments within the movement that museums depict. My analysis draws heavily from the previously mentioned exhibitions.

The Civil Rights Movement challenged the United States to live up to its ideals of racial equality, citizenship, and democracy. It dared America to become a nation with equal justice for all. Leaders and participants of the movement struggled to end discrimination and segregation and to gain equal access to voting rights, education, and public facilities. Museum exhibits that focus on the Civil Rights Era attempt to capture these struggles through displaying places, artifacts, voices, and people of the movement. However, when studying any museum exhibition, the first thing we need to know is the relationship between that exhibition and its political and economic setting (Potter and Leone 1992). Stories of the past are structured by contemporary relationships among groups directly affected. Within the past year, two key developments of civil rights history and memory occurred in Chicago. First was the proposal to rename a section of a street, West Monroe, to Fred Hampton Way and the second was the Du Sable Museum’s commemorative exhibit, “A Right Given But Denied.” Each of these cases work to bring the racial past into the present as they challenge how the struggle is remembered.
Renegotiating the Cultural Landscape

In March 2006, Alderwoman Madeline Haithcock sent fellow politicians in diverging ways when she proposed to rename a portion of Monroe Street on Chicago’s Westside as “Chairman Fred Hampton Way” to honor a slain “hero.” Hampton founded the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party in November 1968 and immediately established a community service program, which included the provision of free breakfasts for schoolchildren and a medical clinic that did not charge patients for treatment. Hampton also taught political education classes and instigated a community control of police project. As articulated by J. Edgar Hoover, then director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the activities of the Black Panthers in Chicago were viewed as incendiary, which eventually led to an all-out assault on the organization by the Chicago police. In 1969, the Black Panther Party headquarters on West Monroe Street was raided three times and over 100 members were arrested. In December 1969, police raided the Panther headquarters—they later claimed that the Panthers opened fire and a shoot-out took place—and Hampton and fellow Black Panther leader Mark Clark were gunned down. While conflicting accounts (and recounts) emerged, perceptions of the incident were divided along racial lines. As such, supporters of the Black Panther Party—especially within black communities—have continued to hail Hampton as a hero while the mainstream has villainized him as a cop killer. The street name proposal infuriated Fraternal Order of Police president Mark Donahue, who called it a “dark day” in the city’s history “when we honor someone who would advocate killing policemen,”
meanwhile families of police officers killed in the line of duty mobilized in opposition.\textsuperscript{43} Through newspaper editorials and speeches at local government meetings, outspoken critics were successful in halting the renaming of West Monroe Street.

Commemorating Fred Hampton not only pulls at the political landscape, but also sheds light on the significance of interpreting and remembering the past for present generations. Many black activists that promoted the street renaming supported it based on both Hampton’s legacy as a social activist and as a memorial to his death at the hands of the police (see Wilkins and Clark 1973).\textsuperscript{44} In contrast, police officials and others bemoaned the proposal because for them, Hampton’s insistence on the presence of racial violence (i.e., his support of blacks arming themselves in self-defense and the Black Panther Party’s surveillance of the police) was viewed as anti-American. The Fred Hampton street naming controversy is the latest in a long line of struggles over and for the use of memory (and individual legacies) in contemporary representations (such as civil rights memory). With this muddled history, the proposal to rename West Monroe Street fits into a growing commemorative pattern in the United States where the

\textsuperscript{43} The debates that the “Fred Hampton Way” sparked were covered within the local media; see Fran Spellman, “Street Name: ‘Embarrassment’ or fair tribute,” \textit{Chicago Sun Times}, March 1, 2006. The uproar caused by the proposal motivated an influential alderman to end honorary street designations in Chicago. Mayor Richard Daley’s support of this measure is evidenced in his response, “Everybody will want a street sign.” By identifying “every other citizen” as equally deserving, Daley strips Hampton from historical significance and assigns him ordinary status. Clearly, Hampton’s reputational legacy is called into question and his importance is denigrated.

\textsuperscript{44} The historical record of [white] police brutality against black men in Chicago, IL has come under fervent review in recent political circles. Much of this fury has stemmed from a special prosecutors’ report (“The Chicago Torture Report”) that concluded Chicago police officers tortured dozens of black suspects over the course of two decades. Another report comes from a 1993 film, “The End of the Nightstick: Confronting Police Brutality in Chicago,” which investigates charges of institutional racism, violence and cover-up. Similarly, in 1999, U.S. Rep. Danny K. Davis (D-Chicago) asked then-President Bill Clinton to appoint a federal task force to investigate incidents of police brutality and misconduct.
reputational politics of memory conflict with the national narrative (see Alderman 2006).45

The challenges brought forth by the Hampton street renaming proposal is a microcosm of civil rights history in American public memory and brings attention to challenges wrought by museums in representing the past. The Hampton proposal is indicative of the inscription of African Americans into the cultural landscape. Additionally, reactions to the Hampton proposal point out how historical events and individuals are remembered, what those memories mean, how they matter, and are politicized within the current landscape. For instance, Dwyer (2006) notes that the numerous forms of civil rights commemoration (streets, schools, museums) create a multi-layered environment that through its symbolic power and the large number of visitors who seek it out serves as a forum in the continuing struggle to define the contemporary significance of the Civil Rights Movement. Memorials often open new chapters of struggle associated with the meaning and significance of the past. The arrival of the movement’s memorial legacy on the cultural landscape offers insight into that legacy’s victories and shortcomings, especially since memorials are elements of the built environment that help (un)fix and represent social identities (Dwyer 2006:6). Museums keep alive those pasts which may have present (and/or future) functions that are associated with the mechanisms of memory—place, narrative, and interpretation.

45 As noted within this study, most scholars have framed civil rights movement within 1954-1968, which necessarily excludes Fred Hampton and the Black Panther Party. He is incorporated here because the civil rights movement provided the impetus for the Black Power Movement of which Hampton was a part. If we argue that the civil rights movement ended in 1968, then we do not allow its legacy to run the course. One of the exhibits did include the Black Panthers as part of their commemoration of the civil rights movement.
The master narrative is not a multi-layered approach to understanding the Civil Rights Movement but rather is a carefully crafted version of the movement that serves social, political and intellectual agendas. But the past cannot be removed from this diatribe; this tussle and negotiation are part of the negotiation of power. What we remember can dictate how we remember; and who controls those means of remembrance also possesses a stronghold on the past and future. The Hampton renaming demonstrates part of the memory work that includes defining Civil Rights Movement participants from outsiders. However, this case shows gaps in representations and then expands what is defined as the memory work from the museum to the renaming of parts of the city.

Recontextualizing the Movement

At Du Sable, *A Right Given But Denied* merits attention for its remapping of civil rights memory. According to its introductory text, the exhibit explores the circumstances that ignited fire for the Civil Rights Movement; additionally, the exhibit explores what happened before and during the Civil Rights Movement, including highlights of the Chicago movement and how the movement continues today.

The exhibit opens with two images of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; the first is a cast bronze bust of the civil rights leader while the second is a reproduction of a photograph titled “In Memory of Dr. King.” In contrast to the master narrative, the exhibit attempts to provide a historic context for the Civil Rights Movement by chronicling the African American fight for freedom throughout the American experience. In achieving this goal, the exhibit uses the Declaration of Independence to frame the legacy of injustice that African Americans have faced. The Declaration proclaims that,
“all men are created equal” and pronounces such lofty goals as “freedom, justice, and equality.” This line of rhetoric stands in stark contrast to the historic legacy of legal and extra-legal measures used to deny African American freedom. To further emphasize this point, replications of the Emancipation Proclamation in addition to the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments are also displayed. These amendments were meant to affirm African American equality by also declaring slavery illegal, African American citizenship, and the right to vote for all U.S. citizens regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. The Emancipation Proclamation was a political ploy used by then-President Abraham Lincoln to “declare” African American freedom during the Civil War. The Proclamation only freed blacks within Confederate states and, since these states seceded from the Union and established their own government/constitution, did not do so in Northern states. As a political ploy that allowed Lincoln’s army to recruit African Americans, the Proclamation has been hailed for its “symbolic freedom” of blacks.

A textual reference within the “Slavery and the Right to Freedom” section notes that early African American life did not reflect America’s founding principles of life, liberty and justice for all. As the text notes, African Americans were sold as property and their movement throughout the country was restricted. The text is followed by four images. The first image is a picture of 50-60 half naked slaves; they are posed for the picture—standing, sitting, and squatting—and they look directly at the camera. The second image is a replica of an auction advertisement for the sale of slaves while the third image is a replica bill of sale, which lists several slaves among the property of an estate.
The final image is a picture of slaves picking cotton in the field. These four images are used to depict the hardships of African American life under slavery. Continuing on the theme of hardship and the fight to freedom is the section on Jim Crow. The text explains that most Jim Crow laws reinforced the idea of African American inferiority through laws and constitutional provisions by separating blacks and whites in public spaces and preventing African American males from working. Also noted is the “separate but equal” precedent that was established in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. Jim Crow—and the state-sanctioned mandates that preceded it—is an important antecedent to the Civil Rights Movement as it provided the context in which the movement took shape. Morris (1999) notes that in the South, blacks were controlled politically because their disenfranchisement barred them from participating in the political process. As a result, their constitutional rights were violated because they could not serve as judges nor participate as jurors. Economically, blacks were kept at the bottom of the economic order because they lacked even minimal control over the economy.

In displaying the Civil Rights Movement, *A Right Given but Denied* moves away from the mainstream narrative and provides a more holistic perspective of the civil rights legacy. Instead of the usual 1954-1968 time frame, the use of America’s founding principles, slavery’s contradictions, and Jim Crow’s restrictions all work together to provide a historical context for the modern Civil Rights Movement. The exhibit provides further historical details by displaying a 1939 picture of the Pullman Porters and a brief mention of A. Phillip Randolph’s proposal for a March on Washington Movement before

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46 The use of images to depict African American hardship under slavery is discussed in fuller detail in chapter five.
turning attention to events that fit within the traditional civil rights era time frame. Pictures of Thurgood Marshall, the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, and student sit-ins highlight this section. Marshall served as the head of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, argued the *Brown v. Board of Education* case of Topeka, Kansas, and served as the first African American judge of the Supreme Court. Marshall’s inclusion emphasizes his role within the movement and his legacy in civil rights memory as a champion for justice and equality. A picture of Rosa Parks anchors the Montgomery Bus Boycotts; Parks’ refusal to give up her seat has turned into a symbolic act of defiance/disobedience. Similarly, the exhibit’s pictures of student sit-ins illustrate the conscientious decisions of many young Americans to dismantle segregationist laws. The two pictures of student sit-ins displayed offer a polarizing effect of activists versus aggressors. The first picture is of two African American students being dragged in the street by police officers while the second picture displays a mixed-race group of student protestors staging a sit-in in front of the Wieboldt Store on South State Street in downtown Chicago in response to police violence. On the one hand, we get a glimpse of the brutality imposed upon civil rights activists and, on the other hand, we see the steadfast use of nonviolent, peaceful protest in action that crossed racial lines. According to Morris (1999), sit-ins were especially important to the modern Civil Rights Movement because these protests became a mass movement themselves, which spread throughout the South and mobilized an important mass base. The sit-ins also had a lasting impact as they led to demonstrations to end racial segregation at pools, churches, and other businesses and institutions. Additionally, these protests led to the establishment of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a social
movement organization of students, and provided a forum for white college students to participate in the Civil Rights Movement.

Figure 12: We Demand Marchers

The 1963 March on Washington and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 are highlighted within the exhibit as they are considered key triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement within the national narrative. A picture of the marchers at the ground level is displayed, which allows visitors to see the multiple ways in which people participated in the March and how they attempted to assert their identity. For instance, male marchers wore signs that read, “I Am A Man”. These visuals denounce the American apartheid system in which blacks were forced into second-class citizenship status that disallowed black males from assuming full manhood. The symbolism carried in the “We Demand Marchers” image is quite powerful. The photographer has captured an image of men and women carrying a host of “We Demand” signs that insisted on ending police brutality while also
requesting decent jobs and voting rights. Each of the signs petitioned for these changes to occur immediately as each ended with “NOW!” (see Figure 12: We Demand Marchers). Museumgoers view a familiar aerial photo of the March showing of the crowd stretching past the Washington Monument; it is estimated that over 250,000 people were in attendance. The audience turnout is important in establishing the March as a resounding success. Again, in confirming its laudatory achievements, a picture of the meeting with President Kennedy, Dr. King and the organizers of the March is displayed; other leaders in the photograph included A. Phillip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young. The meeting verifies governmental approval of the March, which was a key political victory for the organizers. However, what is missing from the collection of pictures is the role of women in the March and the tightrope walk that the presidential cabinet enforced upon the speakers. The sanctioning—and required revisions—of John Lewis’ speech has garnered much attention for its imposition of freedom of speech and staunch rejection of governmental criticism in a public forum (see Fairclough 1997).

Divergent from the mainstream narrative is the exhibit’s use of black militant nationalists, such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party, as alternative approaches to equality. The Nation’s black nationalist approach was radically different from the integrationist approach used by the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Marable (1991) notes that the Nation of Islam was both anti-integrationist and antiracist in opposing Jim Crow laws while they simultaneously advocated for all-black economic, political and social institutions (Marable 1991:55).
Often portrayed in very different terms, the “Another Approach to Equality” section shows that the modern Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement grew out of the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom. In fact, as Tyson (1998) suggests, virtually all of the elements that are associated with “Black Power” were already present in the small towns and rural communities of the South where the modern Civil Rights Movement was born. According to Jalata (2002), the Nation of Islam emerged as a religious-national movement in the 1930s, and it appealed to the Black masses in the 1950s and 1960s as the Garvey Movement did in the 1920s. The demand for “Black Power” is both a political slogan, an appeal for racial solidarity and an expression of the desire for self-esteem and self-consciousness (Wirmark 1974). The master narrative fails to examine sufficiently the roots of black struggles and the range of black self-assertion. “Another Approach to Equality” highlights the two main proponents of the Black Power movement in the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X, in addition to providing details on the Black Panther Party. A display within the exhibit is used to feature the Party’s 10-point program that was developed in 1966; this program included the demands for political power, self-determination, full employment, decent education, housing, food, social justice to end police brutality and unfair trial, and economic development (Marine 1986:35-36). Malcolm X, Stokeley Carmichael, and other radical leaders forcefully articulated that African America should have control over its own political economy, life, and culture to fundamentally transform itself (see Malcolm X 1970; Hamilton and Carmichael 1969). Framed by the Declaration, Emancipation Proclamation, and post-
Civil War amendments, the exhibit shows that the quest for “Black Power” grew out of the traditions of freedom and citizenship.

The exhibit concludes with a video trilogy on the deaths of Medgar Evers, Emmett Till, and the Birmingham Four. The killing of Emmett Till was a brutal affair and served as a painstaking reminder of the brutality of white supremacist ideology. Till’s mother and the Black press generated national publicity by allowing an open casket funeral to fully display the grotesque injustice of his death. Because of the widespread attention of the lynching, the brutality and raw racism of the Jim Crow regime were displayed on a national stage where it was debated and denounced (Morris 1999). African Americans were further enraged when the murderers were acquitted of the charges. The video fits into a recent thrust to resurrect the life of Emmett Till and renegotiate the centrality of his death to the modern Civil Rights Movement. His killing inspired blacks throughout the North and South to engage in dismantling Jim Crow. Hudson-Weems (1998) argues that Till was the catalyst of the Civil Rights Movement and his exclusion from Civil Rights History neglects the importance of Till to the lives of many indelibly affected by it. Till’s death was one of many brutal killings in which blacks were the targets of racial violence. Similarly, Evers’ death in 1963 enraged civil rights activists and sympathizers throughout the nation. Evers was shot in the back in the front yard of his home after returning from an NAACP meeting; he was murdered just hours after President John F. Kennedy’s speech on national television in support of civil

47 Emmett Till’s body was found in Mississippi’s Tallahatchie River weighted down by a seventy-five pound cotton gin fan that was tied around his neck with barbed wire. His body was barely recognizable; one eye was gouged out and his head was crushed.
rights (see Birnbaum and Taylor 2000; Vollers 1995). The title of the video dedicated to Medgar Evers quipped, “Medgar you did not die in vein.” The Birmingham Four video pays homage to the September 15, 1963 murders of four young African American girls attending Sunday school at the Sixteenth Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Addie Mae Collins, aged 11 to 14, were killed while twenty others were injured when a bomb exploded at the church, which was a center for civil rights meetings. The bombing occurred just eighteen days after the March on Washington and several days after the courts had ordered the desegregation of Birmingham’s schools. Clearly, the message of the videos denotes that slain civil rights activists serve(d) as both motivation and purpose for others who participate(d) in the cause afterwards.

By focusing on the stories of the Civil Rights Movement (sit-ins, etc.), museums are able to transcend romanticized versions of American race relations by exploring conflict, struggles, and dreams deferred (Yeingst and Bunch 1997). The Civil Rights Movement remains as an episode of national significance. More important, the exhibits are a reminder that the Civil Rights Movement is not just a part of African American history but a story that should have meaning for all Americans.

Summary: Interpreting the Civil Rights Movement

This chapter focused on representations of the Civil Rights Movement as they are transmitted in and through museums. Institutionalizing civil rights memory into public memory allows us to “remember” the movement regardless of our temporal and social distance from it. The movement has drastically altered the cultural landscape as sacred
memorial sites commemorating the people, occurrences, and symbols important to the period have been created as a way of installing them into public remembrance. One finding is that those in charge of recording memory influence what historical events are remembered, as well as the status of the affected groups in the national collective identity (Raiford and Romano 2004). Additionally, museums are catalysts in displaying how fundamental civil rights were achieved because the exhibits display only the highlights of the modern Civil Rights Movement. The prevailing message of the media culture’s reflective civil rights treatment reinforces the view that there is a national consensus about Civil Rights grounded in the ideas about racial tolerance and opportunity. Americans are encouraged to revisit our past in our cultural museums; these sites allow us to get on the bus in which Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in Montgomery (National Civil Rights Museum), hear the famous words of Dr. King, and see the Woolworth lunch counter where four students sparked the sit-in movement of the 1960s. Much of the revival of the past legitimately conveys good feelings about being American (Morgan 2006).

Museums are sites of the struggle to define and use history because civil rights history and memory are still contested subjects in modern America. In many mainstream museums, the national narrative dominates how the civil rights story is retold. This narrative constrains the diversity of actors and events in history to key events. There is a particular focus on “key” events and/or “key” individuals between 1954 and 1968. These Civil Rights Movement exhibits present a compelling mnemonic image—the juxtaposition of democratic ideals with indiscriminate treatment. Representations of
events such as the March on Washington, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and white backlash to black aspirations are powerful images. This distorts the complexity of the movement and minimizes the contributions of the mini-movements that synergized into the larger whole. Additionally, it stringently identifies who fits into the acceptable story and who does not.

As a result, the national narrative portrays individuals who espouse, exhibit, or are constructed into passivist characters that denote them as non-threatening champions of American ideals. As Sandage (1993) notes, the extent to which an image tells an instantly recognizable “mythic story” allows viewers to connect such images idiosyncratically to their private understanding of the collective past. The national narrative gives special attention to legal challenges to state-sanctioned racism at the expense of a more holistic picture that frames the movement as a continuation of a long struggle for African American freedom and equality. Exhibits should not be limited to reminiscence or commemoration; they should add perspective by aspiring to a greater critical distance and by putting the artifacts and story in context (Lubar 1997). This would aid in our understanding the legacy of the past as our memories of the movement can also play a critical role in shaping our personal, group, and political identities.

The differences in museum’s presentation of the Civil Rights Movement demonstrates that memory is not knowledge of the past, it is knowledge from the past (Margalit 2002:14, emphasis in original) and, as such, it is thought to advance and validate identities, fuel grievances, and give meaning and narrative coherence to individuals and collectivities (Schwartz 1996; Zelizer 1995; Irwin-Zarecka 1994). Unlike
the distant past, as discussed in the previous chapter, exhibiting the recent past is wrought with challenges and demands of living memories. For instance, in exploring the distant past, curators often avoid many of the contested aspects of historical interpretation because of the public’s lack of a direct or personal connection to that history. As illustrated by the discussions of the Fred Hampton Boulevard proposal and the range of exhibits on the Civil Rights Movement, the recent past forces both curators and visitors into an uncomfortable, and often unacknowledged, confrontation over the meaning, ownership, complexity, and interpretation of the recent past (see Yeingst and Bunch 1997). The museum, therefore, is a site where the struggle over interpretation of history is fought out in the exhibit representations.
CHAPTER 7

THE AMISTAD EXHIBIT AS A CASE STUDY

The Amistad Exhibit

The Amistad Exhibit at the DuSable Museum of African American History was run in conjunction with a 21-day visit of the *Freedom Schooner Amistad* (docked at Chicago’s Navy Pier) as part of the museum’s commitment to the collection, documentation, preservation, interpretation and dissemination of the history and culture of Americans of African descent and Africans throughout the Diaspora. Through exhibitions, archives and a diverse array of educational programs, the DuSable Museum seeks to interpret and illuminate their experiences and contributions to American and world history, culture and art.

*Freedom Schooner Amistad* launched March 25, 2000, as a re-creation of the Spanish coastal cargo schooner *La Amistad*, the scene of the historic 1839 shipboard revolt led by 53 illegally enslaved Africans off the coast of Cuba. This plan was thwarted when three days into the journey, a 25-year-old Mende rice farmer named Joseph Cinque, led his people in mutiny against their captors and eventually took command of the vessel. After 63 days, *La Amistad* and her African “cargo” were seized as salvage by the United States Naval Reserve Cutter *USS Washington* near Long Island, New York and towed to
Connecticut’s New London harbor. This 1839 “incident took on historic proportions when former President John Quincy Adams argued and won the case for the defense in 1841. The Amistad Incident of 1839 has attribution as the first human rights case argued and won in the American court system in the United States.

At the time of its display, the Amistad exhibit was one of three traveling exhibits at the Du Sable Museum. The exhibit is composed of four sections: the Hale Woodruff Amistad Murals, the Rene Townsend sculpture, an interactive kids corner and general information on Amistad and slave ships. What I am particularly interested in for this analysis are the murals and the sculpture. The introduction to the exhibit is an eight-foot high board that quotes one of the enslaved Africans, “All We Want is Make Us Free!” In addition, the African captives of the Amistad are listed on the board by name. This listing of names (which includes 32 adults, four children, and six who perished in New Haven (CT), and the mention of the eleven captives that died at sea) attempts to make a human connection with the audience. As a brief textual listing of Africans who were captured during the height of slavery in America, the connotation is to make human those who were considered less than human. By providing their African names, and acknowledging them as both subjects and victims, the exhibit pulls at the very fabric of an American colonial history that seized, nullified and remade many African identities.⁴⁸

⁴⁸There are several slave narratives that deal with this issue, two vivid accounts are The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vass, the African, by Olaudah Equiano and Roots by Alex Haley. Haley’s account deals with the issue of identity and renaming head on through Kunta Kente. Haley shows the struggle of Kunta, the African, to retain his identity and the slave system’s (master, overseer, holder, etc.) fierce desire to “remake” the African as one of the more subversive features of slavery.
The exhibit informs the audience that the Hale Woodruff murals are actually reproductions of the originals and their stated goal is to display his interpretation of the Amistad Incident of 1839. At the request of Dr. Buell Gallagher, then President of Talladega College (AL), Woodruff created two murals for the New Savery Library at Talladega; one was of the founding of Talladega College in 1867 and the other was of the Amistad Mutiny of 1839. Woodruff was unfamiliar with the Amistad Incident and conducted his research at Yale University. After three months of intensive research, Woodruff sought to translate his written notes into visual images and spent the next nine months painting. In the end, he produced three oil-on-canvas panels of the Amistad Incident. Taken together, the murals are six-and-a-half feet tall and forty-two feet wide.

The Woodruff murals seek to retell the Amistad Incident through three dramatic moments. The first mural is a depiction of the mutiny in progress, the second mural depicts the trial and the third mural pictures the return of the African captives to West Africa.

Figure 13: Mutiny in Progress
The Mutiny in Progress

The first mural shows the African captives taking control of the ship (see Figure 13: June 1839). In the center of the mural, one African captive, presumably Joseph Cinque, holds down a white crewmember with one hand while threatening to beat him with the other. There is similar action captured throughout the mural; the African captives have [re]positioned themselves to assert their numerical dominance over their captures. Woodruff depicts the Africans as having physically positioned themselves in control of whites. Pictured next to Cinque, on the right side of the mural, is another white capturer lying on the ground with his hands outstretched toward the African standing above him. The hands of Africans are physically on the other two whites pictured in the action. In both instances, the white capturers also have their hands on the African’s hands/arms.

The “Mutiny in Progress” mural has an historical connotation that plays into the fears of white slave capturers, slave masters, and slave owners alike. The white numerical minority, like the Haitian example, is juxtaposed against the wicked and malevolent structure of slave trading and slave society. In many instances, whites were outnumbered by Black slaves and, as a result, tried to split up Africans from similar

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49 Vincent Harding (1983) has introduced a well-researched and well-presented picture of the opposing forces to America’s economic system based on slave and cheap labor. He chronicles the parallel between the systems of oppression and the systems of resistance against oppression.

regions and tribes to the greatest extent possible. This was done so that African captives
could not effectively communicate with each other, which would hinder the possibility of
working together in revolt or conspiracy against whites. Africans from different regions
and tribes were usually put together to take advantage of their language, tribal and
cultural differences.

Once the Africans had control of the ship, the would-be-captives ordered the
remaining crew members to sail the ship back to Africa. The crew sailed east by day
towards Africa, but altered their course sailing west by night. The ship was eventually
seized in the Atlantic Ocean near Long Island, New York and the captives were taken to
Connecticut.

_The Amistad Trial_

In the second panel, Woodruff depicts the trial of the _Amistad_ captives before the
New Haven court. The left side of the mural depicts the African captives; Africans in the
back row are standing while those in front of them are seated. There are three whites
seated near the center of the mural. Joseph Cinque stands, arms folded, in the center of
the picture. The right side of the panel pictures five white men and one black man seated
while two white men are pictured standing, one of whom is pointing at Cinque. A seated
white man, the judge, is pictured as the backdrop of the mural. The panel can be read for
both denotative and connotative meanings. In one sense, the panel replicates a courtroom
setup of the early 19th century. The seated white judge is listening to both arguments so
that he may make a ruling in the case. However, at the connotative level, the white judge
reminds the viewer of the subordinate position of blacks throughout the 19th century.
The judge, who is both peripheral and central to the action, is both a hegemonic presence and casts a hegemonic gaze. The judge is a subtle reminder that the fate of Africans and Black Americans—or all non-white people—lay in the hands of whites (at least at this historic moment).

Former United States President John Quincy Adams represented the Africans in their quest for freedom before the Supreme Court in 1840-41. The court ruled that the Amistad captives were neither property nor subjects of Spain, but free persons. Adams’ participation in the event furthers the notion of cultural hegemony and symbolic power to the extent that the strength, bravery, and desires of freedom for Blacks—and Africans—in America who worked to dismantle slavery is supplanted by American heroification of Adams and other white abolitionists.

Africans Return Home

The third mural pictures the return of the African captives to West Africa. At the center of the action is an African captive, again presumably Cinque, who is flanked on both sides by one white male and several Africans. They are pictured as if in a discussion, which is difficult to decode. However, of immediate importance and relevance is that they are back in [or on their way back to] Africa. The backdrop of the picture is the ocean, presumably the Atlantic Ocean, and it has two ships in the water. One ship is smaller and occupied by Africans while the other vessel is a bit larger but has no visible occupants. At the connotative level, the background of the panel reorients the viewer to the slave ship, where the “incident” started. With no visible occupants, the ship also serves as a symbolic reminder of the many ships used to carry Africans throughout
the New World as part of the Atlantic slave trade. The slaves were one element of a three-part economic cycle—the Triangular Trade and its infamous Middle Passage—which ultimately involved four continents, spanned four centuries, and included the lives and fortunes of millions of people.

After the U.S. Supreme Court trial ended in 1841, members of the Amistad Committee raised money to send the former captives back to Africa and to found the Mendi Mission in what is now Sierra Leone. Several of the Africans remained at the Mission, but most returned to their villages.

Within the exhibit, the murals are mounted side-by-side and, in this fashion, read as a story that progresses from beginning to the end. The murals are quite effective in this sense and work very well in giving a pictorial rendition of the events. Woodruff could have easily focused on a singular incident—the mutiny, the trial, or the return—however, the focus on three critical events (capture-negotiation-return) shows his commitment to telling as complete a story as possible. He has clearly opened the pathways to dialogue about historical events, their possibilities for effective change, and the importance of collective memory.\footnote{Many studies of collective memory have had prominent historical figures or events as their primary foci (see, for example, Schwartz’s (1991) study of George Washington and Olick and Levy’s (1997) study of the Holocaust).} Institutions, such as museums, are key sites where collective memory is formed in micro-“communities of memory” that are specified by the group with which we share our recollections (Irwin-Zarecka 1994). In part, Woodruff posits himself as an historian who uses the medium of painting to tell a particular story while at the same time using his painting profession to visually recount an
historic incident. Preceded by two placards that describe how he created the murals and the creation of muralism in African American communities, the Woodruff Murals are an effective tool for visualizing African and African American life and their respective and joint struggles for freedom. In this way, the murals are a precise fit with the Amistad story.

A freestanding post accompanies each mural, positioned about seven feet in front of the respective panel, which gives the name of every individual pictured in each mural. While the names of the captives were given earlier in the exhibit, this also serves the purpose of putting faces with names. Joseph Cinque is probably the most easily recognizable person in the murals because of his principal role in the mutiny—most of the action centers around him in all three murals.

*The Amistad Sculpture*

The Amistad Children sculpture by Rene Townsend is the other central feature of this museum exhibit. In addition to the actual sculpture of the four children who were captives on the ship, visitors can read a step-by-step process of how Townsend created the sculpture. For her sculpture, Townsend relied on a life-casting technique, using Chicago school children as models. The children are of different heights, but the prominent feature of the sculpture is that the children are life-sized. Townsend used papier-mâché to create a poster representation of each model’s features and the DuSable Museum took Townsend’s completed papier-mâché sculpture to a metal foundry and had it cast in bronze.
Townsend’s sculptures offer both objective and subjective readings. On the surface, the viewer sees four children standing relatively close together. Disconnected from the Amistad Incident, they are simply a bronzed sculpture of four kids. At a deeper level, this life-sizing technique has a symbolic function of allowing visitors to identify with the captives. The sculpture “gives” life to the four children on board the ship so that they can be read within any humanist context. This life-sized human depiction plays to the human sentiments of the audience and taps into some of the many questions by those who study slavery and the slave trade. Foremost among those questions, and what appears prevalent here, is the question of how anyone could take life from other persons, especially at such young ages.

In addition, the sculpture and bronzing of the children can serve as a reminder of the importance of children to our future. Within the story of the Amistad Incident, the children could easily be forgotten but Townsend’s sculpture helps the viewers recount and rethink every life. Even within Woodruff’s murals, there is only a single depiction of a child, which occurs in the last mural.

In an attempt to read Townsend’s work at a deep level, and extracting its symbolic functions, several images come to mind. While viewing this section of the exhibit I thought of Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and, in particular, his reference to his own children: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” At the same time, I was reminded of the four children killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama just eighteen days after
Dr. King’s speech. In both of these incidents, and depicted through Townsend’s sculpture of the *Amistad* children, I clearly hear “voices” for freedom.

The quest for freedom seems to be the point of the exhibit. As implied by the exhibit of this historic event, quoting the exhibit leaflet, “The story of Amistad holds much passion and intrigue as we look into a part of our history that brings the message of harmony among races to Chicago.” The prominent issue here is the connection between the lives of Africans and Americans and their shared histories. The connection surrounding cultural identity in Black America is clearly stated, especially since the exhibit is housed in the oldest African American museum in the nation.

By paying homage to an event that was one time marginalized by historians, Amistad has become a vital piece in the telling of America’s history. Exhibited as part of a collaboration with the *Freedom Schooner Amistad*, the museum hopes to promote reconciliation and harmony with maximum visibility among the racial groups through the Amistad’s proclaimed mission of freedom and hope. The DuSable Museum does an excellent job in portraying this message through the Woodruff murals and Townsend sculpture. Taken as a whole, the exhibit displays humanity, the enduring desire for freedom and a commitment to preserving and documenting the history and culture of Americans of African ancestry and Africans throughout the Diaspora. The exhibit also shows that African American history cannot be reduced to peripheral or additive
measures of inclusion, but is instead a vital component to American history—it is part of the American story.\textsuperscript{52}

**Summary: Constructing Identity and Culture**

The place of Africa and examining (or remembering) slavery is key in the historic representations of African American history. In one sense, Black American history has been grounded in Africa and Africanness. On the other hand, the twentieth century was wrought with slavery’s complications—such as justice, equality, and freedom. Additionally, discussing the recent past often requires that we recall the distant past. When people enter museums they do not leave their cultures and identities at home; nor do they respond passively to museum displays. They interpret museum exhibitions through their prior experiences and through the culturally learned beliefs, values, and perceptual skills that they gain through membership in multiple communities.\textsuperscript{53}

Furthermore, an important facet of the museum as a site of cultural production is the way in which subjects (the items and people on display) themselves become shaped by the negotiation of the boundaries distributed within its walls.

To a large degree, the construction of a collective identity is essentially an act of constructing and reconstructing the past. Moreover, the essence of inclusion is the act of official recognition. Recognition of identity—group or individual—is essential to the formation of one’s identity. Similarly, the lack of recognition, or the

\textsuperscript{52} For a discussion of connecting seemingly unconnected events/people see Barthes (1972); for a discussion on hegemony, power, and knowledge see Foucault (1980).

\textsuperscript{53} In *Museums and Communities*, Karp and Lavine (1992) illustrate both the struggles and the collaborations between museums and the communities they aim to serve.
misrecognition of identity, bars the path of the development of collective identity. Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves (Taylor 1995:249).

Race, ethnicity, and culture are three of the basic building blocks of identity. Through the construction of race, ethnicity, and culture, individuals and groups attempt to address the problems found in boundaries and meaning. As argued in the analysis presented here, identity is best understood as a dynamic, constantly evolving property of both individual uniqueness and group organization. The construction and representation of identity and culture are the result of both structure and agency—a dialectic played out by identity groups and the larger society. While race is a socially constructed phenomenon (van den Berghe 1967), ethnicity is the product of actions undertaken by ethnic groups as they shape and reshape their self-definition and culture (Nagel 1994). 54 In addition, external social, economic, and political processes and actors also construct ethnicity as they shape and reshape ethnic categories and definitions.

Groups construct their cultures in many ways that involve mainly the reconstruction of historical culture and the construction of new culture. Cultural reconstruction techniques include revivals and restorations of historical cultural practices and institutions; new cultural constructions include revisions of current culture and innovations—the creation of new cultural forms. Cultural construction and

reconstruction are ongoing group tasks in which new and renovated cultural symbols, activities and materials are continually being added to and removed from existing cultural repertoires. As a result, cultural representations are continuously negotiated and re-negotiated across time and space.
CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSION

This study began as an investigation of contemporary exhibits about African American history and culture at six museums in an attempt to explore issues of racial representation, collective identity, and cultural authority. My main research question focused on how African Americans were represented in museum exhibits. I was interested in investigating how African Americans were exhibited within and across museums; particularly, I wanted to compare these representations at black centered and mainstream museums. In order to do this, I had to appreciate the unique role(s) that ethnic museums in general, and black centered museums specifically, play in crafting a response to the mainstream and how they served their respective communities. Having been trained in African American Studies during my undergraduate years and for two years in graduate school, I believed that history and culture would play a prominent role in how museums constructed and negotiated identities.

In carrying out this project, I conducted a systematic two-part investigation of exhibition practices across Black-centered and mainstream museums. First, I explored the socio-historic discourses on race as played out in the museum medium and its implications for shaping collective identity. Second, I examined the use of exhibits in the process of representing social and cultural identities. In completing this project, I learned
that the varying foci of museums shape cultural representations throughout their respective exhibition practices, which in turn fosters narratives and counter-narratives of cultural identity and cultural authority that are [re]negotiated within museums.

**Summary of the Study**

I began the dissertation with an introductory statement that laid out groundwork for investigating museum practices and representations. Additionally, I highlighted the gap in sociological literature in examining issues of race, representation, and identity in museums. As has been noted throughout this study, changes in exhibition practices reflect shifts in contemporary social and political attitudes as well as changing ideas about the role of the museum in society.

While the museum exhibition reflects these discourses, it also takes part in shaping the way Americans view themselves in relation to the nation (Duncan 1991). In addition, the museum acts as a key site for collective memory. While ethnic museums can provide an important space for negotiating and managing identities, their representations are simultaneously situated alongside—and often against—those images projected by mainstream media. These projected images, from museums and mass media alike, are an essential element to the presentation of self that many African Americans use to establish their identity. Museums function as complex repositories of African American culture. Additionally, museums may be used to develop self-identity, thus serving as a vehicle for the nuanced exploration of cultural and historical memory. Collective identity in Black-centered museums creates a space for interrogating generational influences and the tensions arising from the relationship between the past and the present. When examined
closely, culture, history, memory, and imagination rely on ancestral sites of memory for meaningful interactions with the museumgoer.

Specifically, some of the social representations that have impeded African American’s ability to conform to the dominant ideology of what it means to be American are addressed within this study. Black-centered museums have continuously challenged and refuted the historical misrepresentations of Black national and gendered identity, and the cultural implications of those representations. By analyzing the historical shift in the representations of “blackness” (in both visual displays and naming/categorizing) and the simultaneous commodification and dehumanization of African Americans, this study displayed the complexity of representations that museums use to inform and articulate identities. Finally, examining cultural images housed in Black-centered museums provides a framework for understanding Black communities resist hegemonic stereotypes by deploying representational strategies that evoke the diverse and rich cultural legacies of African Americans.

In chapter 3, I reviewed the methods used for this study and discussed how museums were selected for inclusion in this study and provided a brief historical overview of each museum selected. Additionally, I considered how museums consciously and unconsciously create an interpretative framework for experience. I also examined the features that make each African American-centered exhibit a useful case study while acknowledging the larger representational field into which they all fit. The categorical divide of the museums provides a representative sample of contrasting museum foci, which have an institutional impact on the representations of racial identity.
The African American sites were selected in order to examine museums whose main purpose is to preserve and interpret the historical experiences and achievements of African Americans. The mainstream museums are all highly visible in their respective cities.

In chapter 4, I used Africa as a point of departure to investigate issues of cultural consumption and cultural authenticity in selected museums. This chapter focused on two key issues: first, what is the “place” of Africa in American museums. That is, how does Africa fit (or not fit) into the mission, organization, and articulation of museums? Second, what is the “place” of Africa in negotiating African American identity instituted in museums? Black American identity was changed in the 1980s to be nationally recognized as African Americans, what does this mean for how Black American/African American identity is articulated in museums? With these two foci in mind, this chapter examines the contemporary notions of Africa as “Other” and the articulation [and possible re-articulation] of African American cultural identity. Furthermore, I explore how Africa is negotiated within institutions that were specifically designed to narrate the African American experience and chronicle its historical and cultural vitality.

A key finding in this investigation is the socially constructed aspects of ethnicity; the ways in which ethnic boundaries, identities, and cultures are negotiated, defined, and produced through social interaction inside and outside ethnic communities (Nagel 1994). In rearticulating black American identity to African American, many institutions, such as black-centered museums, used Africa as a symbolic identifier for ethnicity. At the Du
Sable Museum for instance, Africa was used as a prism to communicate an African American cultural and historical legacy.

Even in naming the exhibit “Africa Speaks,” an implicit meaning clearly is present. After being colonized, misappropriated, stereotyped and denigrated Africa will no longer be silent or perhaps silenced. This racial project is prevalent throughout the Civil Rights, Black Pride & Black Power Movements and is central to the struggle for human rights, dignity and social justice. By valorizing Africa, these black-centered museums have reified a hyphenated pluralist identity—that is achieved through the mere display of artifacts—or an identity of empowerment through historical memory.

In Chapter 5, I examined the dynamics of visual displays that focus on slavery. The exhibits in Black centered museums traced the historical roots of slavery’s transformation from a taboo subject to it being educationally and culturally important. Once omitted from history texts, the stories of slavery are now told through institutions, such as museums. I argued that the rhetorics employed by Black-centered sites are part of a racialized regime of representation that seeks to confront the symbolic annihilation of slavery prevalent throughout mainstream museums. Instead of trivializing, deflecting, or erasing slavery from the American story as found in mainstream museums, these Black-centered sites frame the institution of slavery and the experience of enslavement within the tropes of survival, resistance, and achievement. The visual displays depicting slavery in museums can be viewed as mechanisms by which cultural memory is induced as a tool for making meaning for audiences of all generations and the tensions arising from the relationship between the past and the present. While exhibits and other visual displays
help us remember slavery, the intertwining complexities of race, nation, and politics confound museum practices. Additionally, within exhibits that focus on slavery—and other events of the distant past—are contests over the utility of the past for present purposes.

In Chapter 6, I examined how contest over historical memories and representations have played out in the recent past. In recent years, the story of the modern Civil Rights Movement has been incorporated in the memorial landscape through new museum sites, expanded museum collections, and changes to the civic infrastructure (i.e., proposals to (re)name streets, schools, and community centers). This thrust in “memorial work” has had a definitive imprint on the Untied States’ cultural landscape. However, traditional interpretations of the movement have aggrandized elite-led institutions and their leaders (i.e., NAACP, SCLC, Martin Luther King, etc.) while simultaneously excluding many key figures and local organizations (such as women and churches).

This chapter focused on the Civil Rights Movement and the methods employed by museums in exhibiting this historic moment. It examined the representative images of the movement to show how they are articulated through collective identity and collective memory strategies vis-à-vis the national narrative. The chapter centered on three focal points: how the movement is exhibited; how the selected images define (and redefine) the movement; and, finally, how these images are tied to African American collective identity. Thus, I investigated the role museum exhibits play in summarizing and
synthesizing into a coherent narrative the people, places, and events associated with the movement (and what this narrative looks like).

In Chapter 7, I used the Du Sable Museum’s Amistad Exhibit as a case study of racial projects within museums. Here, I investigated the theory and practice of culture, identity, and representation. The case study exposes the many ways that mediated representations (paintings, photographs, films, fashions, and everyday objects) both shape and are shaped by the concepts, values, and meanings that constitute cultural life in contemporary urban societies.

**Key Themes in the Research**

Considering them collectively, the exhibits used in this study focused on a range of representations about African American history, culture and identity that have been transmitted in and through museums. Institutionalizing memories of Africa, slavery, and the Civil Rights Movement into public memory allows us to “remember” these spaces, places and events regardless of our distance from them. All of these have drastically altered the cultural landscape as sacred memorial sites commemorating the people, occurrences, and symbols important to these particular periods have been created as a way of installing them into public remembrance. What is clear is that who is in charge of the memory of historical events influences what gets remembered, as well as the status of the affected groups in the national collective identity. Additionally, in exhibiting Africa, slavery and the modern Civil Rights Movement, museum displays are catalysts in articulating how African Americans and black-centered institutions construct cultural identities. Americans are encouraged to revisit our past in our cultural museums; these
sites allow us to experience and relive these time periods and slices of African American life and reaffirm African American identity.

Africa, slavery and civil rights history and memory still are contested subjects in modern America. In many mainstream museums, slavery and the legacies and cultural connections to Africa are omitted from the exhibition space while the national narrative dominates how the civil rights story is retold. Representations of slavery and events during the Civil Rights Movement are powerful images and have an indelible impact on how African American identity is projected. Museum sites and the attempts of museum staff at retelling these stories are often divergent depending upon the differing museum foci. These differences (and similarities) are essential elements of how we perceive others and ourselves. As Lubar (1997) notes, exhibits should add perspective by aspiring to a greater critical distance and by putting the artifacts and story in context. This would aid in our understanding the legacy of the past.

Consistent with the literature, there still exists a dichotomous relationship between representations of African Americans in Black-centered museums vis-à-vis mainstream museums. While traditional museums have improved their research, collection, and exhibiting practices, their institutional focus limits their representations to small slices of the African American story. As shown in this study, Black-centered museums offer contrasting narratives to mainstream museums and continue to press for a more accurate retelling of African American identity and United States history. It is evident through practices that museum staffs in both Black-centered and mainstream museums desire to meet the demands of their continually changing and growing
audiences. In order to achieve this, the museums continue to diversify their exhibits—in addition to programming and educational research—to engage a wider realm of visitors. Also, the creation and work of black-centered and other ethnic-specific museums have fostered more inclusive representation practices.

Theoretically, this study is situated within three paradigms and makes contributions to each. These paradigms are racialization, memory, and cultural representations. Racialization focuses on how objects, people, and relations are never inherently about race, but rather become racialized through a social process of making meaning and allocating resources. This is evident especially in investigating the “place” of African in museums. This study drew on the idea of memory as an ongoing process of negotiation through time. Examining the influence of collective memory allows space to investigate how museums activate cultural constraints, reinterpret past historical events and figures, and act as a symbolic basis for group identity. This is displayed in discussions of both slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. Museums are important sites where knowledge and power are created and identities are constructed and rearticulated. As such, examining visual images cross-culturally provided a framework to examine how Black communities resist hegemonic stereotypes by deploying representational strategies that evoke the diverse and rich cultural legacies of African Americans. As has been articulated here, within museums and across other social, cultural and educational institutions, there are currently complex debates about the telling of African American history, the selection of cultural images, and how African Americans should be represented.
Most contemporary inquiries into cultural representations of the American experience at museums are situated outside of the sociological purview. Anthropologists, historians, and museologists have provided key insights into these workings. Much of the sociological work has examined the structure of museums, how mainstream museums have incorporated different slices of racial/ethnic experiences, and how ethnic museums operate within the United States’ cultural landscape. However, to a large degree, African Americans and Black-centered museums have been left out of these discussions even though the study of African American public history is long (Stewart and Ruffins 1986). Thus, a significant contributor to the American experience, namely African Americans, remains underexplored. The present study begins to fill this gap through a cross-cultural analysis of African American representations in museum exhibits. Indeed, as Weil (2002) has noted, our museums ought to be operated with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of people’s lives—on what other basis might we possibly ask for public support?

**Future Research**

Future research should include interviews with museum staff to investigate the processes of selecting and securing exhibits, the intent of the (re)presentations, and the desired goals for exhibits. My study lacks analysis of the work of the museum staff in this process. This element of analysis can help bridge the gap between the intent of representations and reading of exhibits. This could provide a deeper understanding of museum practices. Quite clearly, funding and access to resources are two key factors in the selection of exhibits; these factors need to be taken into consideration when
considering what ultimately is exhibited (or not). That I was only able to secure only one interview of museum staff placed particular parameters and boundaries around the project. This severely limited my ability to gain a more in-depth view of museum practices. Even the information elicited in the one interview that I conducted shed new light on how to think about exhibits. These types of conversations among museum personnel have an impact on decisions about exhibits on many levels.

A follow-up study to my research should broaden the museum selection to include a higher volume of museums—both black-centered and mainstream across a wider variety of locales. Concerns of the urban landscape and representations may differ in different cities. More importantly, how representations matter and if the cultural landscape influences museum practices also may vary by location.

Finally, a follow-up study of museumgoers would be useful in further studying museum practices and not exhibit interpretations exclusively. Actual practices are often more significant an indicator of museum practices. Exhibiting dilemmas will continue to exist across all museums regardless of focus or location. Historically, mainstream museums have enjoyed a higher visitor population than black-centered museum. How these museums differ in resources and practices is significant to what and how African American identity and culture are represented.
REFERENCES


VITA

Derrick Brooms holds a B.A. degree in African and African American Studies from the University of Chicago and did graduate studies in Africa and African American Studies at Clark Atlanta University.

For the past 10 years, he has worked in a teaching and administrative capacity at the secondary school level, which includes having spent the previous four years at Urban Prep Charter Academy for Young Men. Urban Prep, Illinois’ first an all-boys charter school (Chicago), has now grown to three campuses and by mid-March every member of the first graduating class (2010) was accepted to a four-year college or university.

While at Loyola, Derrick has been an active member in the American Sociological Society and the Association of Black Sociologists. He won the ABS Graduate Student Paper Competition in 2006 and was a recipient of the ABS Student Travel Award in 2004. He will receive his Ph.D. in May 2010 and his areas of interest include Race and Ethnic Relations, Urban Sociology, Social Problems, Culture and Representation and Black Masculinity.
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__________________________  __________________________
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