**Museum of African American History and Culture: One miracle realized, and many to go**

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Late in the day, after most of the camera crews and reporters who turned out for a media preview of the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture have packed up their cameras and digital recorders and gone away, an unaccompanied Jesse Jackson comes walking through.

He is recognized by a few of the remaining reporters; they call out to him, but he affects not to hear, striding past at a brisk clip, the way famous people do when they don’t want to be waylaid. When he is finally cornered by an intrepid young man for a photo, Jackson obliges — the graying, 74-year-old lion of the civil rights years posing next to an image of his Afro’d and goateed younger self leading a march somewhere, somewhen — but it seems pretty clear he’d rather be left alone.

Which is a mildly remarkable thing. Jackson, after all, is known in media circles as one of the more accessible public figures there is, a man who never met a camera he didn’t like. But on this day, he exudes the palpable sense of a man who wishes he could just stand by himself in the miracle of this museum and take it all in.

Of course, the miracle is not yet finished. Work crews are still hustling back and forth, equipment carts are all over the place, some display cases are still empty, some videos play without sound, Emmett Till’s casket has not yet been installed. The Museum hurtles toward its scheduled Sept. 24 unveiling on a wing and prayer.

But the fact that there will even be an opening is perhaps the biggest miracle of all. The push to celebrate African-American history on the National Mall began 101 years ago with a proposal by the Committee of Colored Citizens of the Grand Army of the Republic, a group of Civil War veterans. In 1988, then-freshman Congressman John Lewis introduced a bill to create the museum. It failed.

Lewis, a quietly stubborn bulldog of a man, reintroduced his bill every year for the next 15. He was repeatedly blocked by Republican Sen. Jesse Helms, the conservative segregationist. Eventually, Lewis simply outlasted him. Helms, beset with health problems, left the Senate in 2002. The next year, President George W. Bush signed Lewis’ bill into law. In 2012, Bush’s successor, President Barack Obama, participated in the groundbreaking. Both presidents will participate in the opening.

The facility they will celebrate stands out starkly from the white limestone, marble and granite structures that dominate the Mall. The Museum of African-American History and Culture is a three-tiered building covered by cast-aluminum panels colored a striking bronze. Inside, it seeks not simply to tell a story, but to frame a contradiction, a moral incongruity, that has defined … *haunted*, this country since before this country was:

How can America be both land of the free and home of the slave?

That contradiction is made vivid in a display depicting Thomas Jefferson and the founding of the United States. High on a wall behind the third president are his deathless words about the self-evident truth of human equality. In a display case to his left are shackles for the binding of human property. Stacked behind him are bricks bearing the names of the generations born from his defacto rape of Sally Hemings, a woman he owned.

To reach that display, you must pass through a series of dark, low-ceilinged chambers depicting the origins of the American custom of people buying. As you enter, you read the following 1788 quote from British poet William Cowper: “I admit I am sickened at the purchase of slaves, but I must be mumm, for how could we do without sugar or rum?”

The Museum marshals a fleet of statistics to illustrate the dimensions of the trade that so fleetingly troubled the poet’s conscience. From 1649 to 1802, you learn, Denmark transported 85,000 slaves to the America. Between 1549 and 1818, France imported 1.4 million. Between 1562 and 1807, Great Britain brought in 3.3 million.

A quarter of a billion dollars is the “value of cotton produced by enslaved African Americans in 1861;” $3,059,000,000 is the “value assigned to enslaved African Americans in 1860.” Those sums, keep in mind, represent 19th century dollars.

You are out of sight of Thomas Jefferson by the time you encounter those figures. You are one floor above him when you come across videos of the racial violence African Americans encountered in the years after Jefferson’s contradiction burst like a boil into Civil War. There is no sound, so you watch in silence as a crowd in Marion, Indiana, poses in 1930 with the hanging bodies of Thomas Smith and Abram Shipp the way hunters might with a lion carcass, and a little white girl grimaces (or is that a smile?) up at the manacled body of Rubin Stacy in Fort Lauderdale in 1935.

And if capturing the contradiction of America is one of the museum’s core challenges, here is another: how do you tell this story? How do you do it justice in a nation of historical illiterates wedded to conscience-salving myths of what they think the past was about and resentful of anyone who would deny them the comfort of their lies? How do you tell these ugly truths when so many white people recoil from black history because it makes them feel guilty and uncomfortable and so many black ones do the same because it makes them embarrassed and angry?

There is, after all, a reason the rapper Snoop Dogg railed against this year’s remake of “Roots” and it had nothing to do with script, acting or production value. Some people, simply don’t want to know these things.

Lonnie Bunch, the founding director of the museum, says he was aware of that challenge coming in. “We spent a lot of time the first two years interviewing people, what they knew, what they didn’t want to know. People either wanted to know everything about slavery or nothing about slavery. What I felt was that our job was to give the public not just what it wanted, but what it *needed*. Therefore, we thought about, how do we tell stories that would allow us, [as] African Americans to, quite candidly, no longer be embarrassed by their slave ancestors, no longer be embarrassed by the struggles their community had?”

It was important, says Mary Elliott, co-curator of the Slavery to Freedom exhibition, not to give visitors a sugarcoated history. “I hope they really see the unvarnished truth of this story of slavery,” she says. “We talk about the harsh reality of slavery, but it’s juxtaposed against the resistance, the resilience and the survival of a people. It’s also the story of how African Americans really helped to define the nation, shape the nation, physically, geographically, culturally, socially, politically, economically. We want people to see all that. And we want people to see that juxtaposition of profit and power against the human cost.”

At the same time, she says, it is important to balance that painful truth with the thing that has always leavened and ennobled African-American struggle, including John Lewis’ struggle to bring the museum itself into being. Meaning, the stubborn belief that hard work and faith will always, eventually, force the dawn. Martin Luther King spoke of the need to “hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.”

“It is not an exhibition of guilt or shame,” Elliott says. “It’s an exhibition about American history told through the African-American eye. It’s for all of us to think about and to talk about so that we can get to the next stage.”

It is, says Bunch, important “to be able to say, at the end of the presidency of Barack Obama, that this museum will be a safe space to have those conversations to help you understand what has gone on before, not simply to look back in nostalgia but to use that as a useful tool to understand the world we’re living in today.”

Indeed, this museum arrives at a particularly pregnant moment. The triumphant election and re-election of the nation’s first African-American president has ripped open a seam of racial bile. You would have to go back to the 1950s to find a period when African-American people felt more under siege.

In 2016, the Voting Rights Act lies in shambles courtesy of the Supreme Court, and the state of North Carolina was just caught trying to steal the ballot from black voters. Chicago is a daily heartbreak — and South Florida is not far behind. The War on Drugs has been unmasked as a war on African-American men, a program of mass incarceration seeking to reimpose Jim Crow under new management. A spate of unpunished killings of unarmed African Americans — Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin — has people marching and urban areas exploding like America hasn’t seen in fifty years. It has become controversial to assert that “black lives matter.” And it seems grimly fitting that the Republican Party has chosen a white supremacist to replace the first black president.

Into all of that comes this repository of the stories that have made us. And it is hard to fault Jesse Jackson or anyone else who just wants to stand and absorb, who finds value in being reminded, as the gospel song puts it, “how I got over.”

So a bill of sale for a human being gives way to the two room house a pair of former slaves built to prove to themselves they were free, gives way to a segregated train car, gives way to the dress Carlotta LaNier wore when she tried to enroll at Central High in Little Rock, gives way to Richard and Mildred Loving going all the way to the Supreme Court just for the right to be married to one another.

In one gallery, The Temptations are singing

“The childhood part of my life wasn’t very pretty,

See, I was born and raised in the slums of the city.”;

In another, Malcolm X is making it plain:

“We declare our right on this Earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being, in this society, on this Earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary.”

Projected on a wall, Bill Russell takes a sweeping hook shot. Muhammad Ali roars down at Sonny Liston. James Baldwin works at his typewriter, Barack Obama strides the columned walkway of a white mansion built by slaves.

And is it not true that a people who can go from the depths of a slave ship to the pinnacle of power can do pretty much anything? Therein lies the ultimate value of the building that has taken shape at 14th and Constitution within sight of the Washington Monument. It forces us to remember that, though these are besieged days, they are not the first such days we have known. The story is ongoing, African Americans still in the process of becoming.

Because the museum is not the only miracle that isn’t finished yet.