

Voices|Visions

Summary Report of
Exploratory Interviews
about the
National Museum of
African American
History and Culture
Smithsonian Institution
Office of Policy and Analysis

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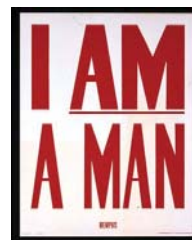


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Preface

Building a responsive museum depends on knowing what the public thinks about the subject matter and what it wants and expects. Simply talking to members of the general public can many produce valuable insights. In the case of the National Museum of African American Culture and History (NMAAHC), such conversations must seek out a variety of viewpoints and confront controversial topics relating to both the past and the present.

When the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) planned this formative research on public opinions about NMAAHC and its subject matter, the researchers decided to interview a wide variety of people in different settings without a well-defined set of questions. Rather, interviewers initially introduced the idea of a new Smithsonian museum dedicated to the African American experience, and let the conversations flow from that point in directions determined by the interviewees, occasionally interjecting general questions to ensure that certain main themes were raised. Some of the resulting discussions were well-stocked with memorable insights, while others were more scattershot, but in most cases, the observations that came up were thoughtful enough for inclusion in this report.

After the interviews were transcribed and examined, interesting quotations were selected and arranged into several broad categories. Although some of the quotations are more reflective, articulate, or memorable than others, they collectively provide a rich and nuanced overview of how a sample of the public feels about a national museum devoted to African American history and culture. Included are personal experiences relevant to the subject matter, reflections on progress and stagnation in society, thoughts on the contributions of African Americans to American culture as whole, and much more.

Our understanding of public perceptions toward NMAAHC, or any prospective museum, will always be partial and limited. Creating a new museum will always be more an art than a science. However, the views presented here provide a useful initial glimpse of the mind of public in whose name NMAAHC is being built; qualitative research such as this can be a useful aid in the difficult process of identifying the elements that make for a successful museum.

I wish to thank NMAAHC Director Lonnie Bunch and Director of Education Esther Washington for engaging OP&A to undertake this fascinating research. I would also like to thank all of the OP&A staff and interns who conducted interviews, engaged in dialogue about the findings, and offered observations and suggestions about further research. I especially want to thank Kathy Ernst, James Smith, and Whitney Watriss, who organized the report.

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Introduction

The following pages include quotations obtained from 86 interviews (involving a total of 98 individuals) conducted by OP&A staff members and interns during the summer of 2007. The purpose of these interviews was to sound out the thoughts of a wide variety of individuals about what might draw them to a museum dedicated to the African American experience.

No attempt was made to obtain a representative sample of any specific population. Rather, interviewers were free to select their own subjects, and the only criterion for inclusion was a willingness to think through the topic at hand. Most interviewees were visitors to Smithsonian museums who expressed an interest in the topic when approached by OP&A researchers, although some were personal acquaintances of OP&A staff and interns or were approached at locations other than museums. (See Appendix A for interviewee demographics.) Individual interviews ranged from less than five minutes to well over an hour. In most cases, the interviews were recorded; when this was not the case, careful notes were taken.

The interviews were open-ended. While an interview guide was used to loosely steer the conversation, interviewees were given wide latitude to discuss anything about African American culture, or the prospective National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) itself, that they found interesting, exciting, puzzling, compelling, distressing, or otherwise of note. This led many of the interviews in fascinating directions, often involving personal recollections or anecdotes on subjects to which interviewees felt a personal connection—from the Maine lawyer who recalled his frightened incomprehension of the scenes of civil unrest he witnessed on television as a child, to the middle-aged African American woman from Atlanta who lamented the detachment of her younger relatives from the struggles for equality that defined her life; from the African American man who told about his father, a World War II veteran, being shown to the back of a sandwich shop in South Carolina because they didn't serve blacks, to the older woman visiting from Greece who insisted “bad history” must be told so that young people will not repeat it—as she sees happening in Germany, where some young people are Nazis. The result is a rich collection of insights on the questions, concerns, hopes, and expectations of a diverse cross-section of prospective NMAAHC visitors.

In the interest of readability, the OP&A study team has tried to loosely organize the quotations into broad thematic areas,¹ and it has restricted commentary and analysis to a bare minimum. Exploratory interviews such as these are of value not for any firm conclusions they offer about what the museum's creators “should” or “should not” do, but rather for vividly illustrating the range, depth, and variety of thoughts and feelings

¹ It should be noted that in attempting to sort quotations into the various themes represented here, it became clear to the study team that any taxonomic scheme would be at best a blunt instrument for organizing the many ideas that interviewees brought up. Many quotations defied easy categorization, or might plausibly have been placed in any of two or more of the general categories used here. Thus, the organization of this paper should be seen not as analysis-by-stealth, so much as an effort to make sifting through the myriad ideas presented here more manageable for the reader.

that prospective visitors bring to the museum and its subject matter. The report concludes, however, with several suggestions for future study and analysis that occurred to OP&A researchers in conducting these interviews and organizing the selected quotations. OP&A staff also provided their own reflections about the interviews they conducted, which appear in Appendix B.

African American Identity

One overriding theme that emerged from the interviews was strong interest in exploring African American identity: the cultural identity of the African people brought to America as slaves; the roots of a distinctly African American culture in the experience of slavery; continuities and discontinuities with African cultures; the many journeys and paths of African Americans to the present; and the diversity within African American culture and peoples.

Circumstances of the Slave Trade

Some interviewees were interested in what was going on in Africa leading up to the start of the slave trade. What were the social, political, economic, and other conditions of that time that allowed the slave trade to happen?

- ❖ When you think of culture, you think of values, and you think of the origins of those values. So the ancestry of [blacks in America should be covered]. Most likely, they came from West Africa, so perhaps you should highlight what was happening in that part of Africa at the time the first slaves were brought to the Americas. What made it possible for these Africans to be taken as slaves ...? [*Q: How much of the pre-slavery African experience is essential to telling the African American story...?*] Not too much, but enough of an introduction for someone who is curious—say, if an African American child were to ask, “Gee, how did this happen?” ... Something simple that a small child can understand. — *Asian-American female, 40s, local*
- ❖ I would start it with the slave trade, and I would probably start it in the 1600s, maybe earlier. I mean, the slave trade starts when the Portuguese and the Dutch start establishing ports on the coast of Africa. You can go back even further than that and discuss the slave trade between the various African tribes. Slavery was regular trade in Africa and was not something that was brought to them. — *White male, 30s, from Alexandria*
- ❖ Everybody knows about the slave ships, but maybe before that—how the white people got the Africans. I am from South Korea ... I think the whole country knows about the African slaves—that is already famous. But maybe before that—the history of the African people. — *Asian female, 20s, from Georgia (originally from South Korea)*

African Ancestor Cultures

Likewise, some interviewees wanted to know about the African social and cultural traditions that were transmitted with the slave trade. How did these manifest themselves in African American slave traditions? How do they continue to influence us today?

- ❖ It would be really interesting to trace what was brought by African Americans from their home country—food, music, and traditions—that have evolved and changed over time, and that are now part of our culture here. — *White female, 60s, local*
- ❖ I would start with the beginning—ancient Africa—and then I would move out to the present. ... Some of the ancient dances we did back in the day, and contemporary ones, too. — *African American male, 20s, from North Carolina*
- ❖ I would stay with the idea of showing life on the African continent and [presenting] a continuum. Life didn't stop when they came here, but it evolved here. ... If you can show this evolution from back there to now and how mentalities were preserved or changed and how people from here are different than people from there, I would be interested in that. — *White female, 20s, from Chicago*
- ❖ A very long time ago, I was at an exhibition in Dallas that had African and African American stuff—artwork left over from the Civil War, such as woven artwork, that was made by slaves. ... It started from Africa and early African tribes and progressed to African American art. It was a timeline of different artwork; the collection pieced it together. ... I liked how it transitioned from African artwork to African American art. You could see the influences of the art from the continent when it came over here from the slave trade. You could see that [slaves] kept up the artwork and the same traditions. — *Asian-American female, 20s, from Texas*
- ❖ All things from the period right after the Middle Passage, and if possible things from before then. Anything from Africa, where one can go back and maybe see an artifact that might be a family heirloom—and who knows where it takes you on your family tree. “Where did this come from?” “Oh, this was passed down through the family.” But if you could actually make a distinction: “Oh, this is from Gambia.” We are quite fascinated with Alex Haley and *Roots*, and how you can actually trace that back. That's something with which I can connect—Old Kingdom artifacts. — *African American male, 60s, local*
- ❖ You can break down all sorts of things in our culture today—how we dress, the music we listen to—and trace them back to the African American experience from a long time ago. That process would be interesting to show. ... So an interesting theme would be how African Americans have influenced where we are today. — *African American female, 50s, local*

Journeys

A theme that emerged in several of the discussions was that of the great journeys of African American history, such as the Middle Passage, the Great Migration, and the African Diaspora writ large.

- ❖ A friend is working on a book based on raw data about all the ships that brought slaves here—what flag they were flying, what ports they left from, who was the captain of the ship, and all of the banal things. That is interesting also. ... I remember a film on the Holocaust, where they traced all the trains and who the conductor was and when they left such and such a place, and how people had to know what was going on. That in itself would be interesting—to know where everybody came from, where they went, when they went there, and how did they go. — *White female, 60s, local*
- ❖ I think it should be like a journey—we started here, lingered so long. We began here after Reconstruction, [then came] the World War. We hear about the Middle Passage all the time, but not so much about the great migration from South to North. They wanted to get away from there, and then they looked to the money. My family came north because we heard you could pick money up off the streets. A lot of black folks went to industrial cities because that's where the money was. And you worked on the railroad; we were porters and stuff. — *African American male, 60s, local*
- ❖ You may start with the slave trade, or you may start beyond that. Our civilization began in Africa, and you could have a part of the exhibit that deals with the traveling—the way peoples traveled out of Africa through Europe, through Asia, essentially the Middle East, Russia, across the Bering to everywhere. Scientists have identified that all people began in Africa and spread out in fairly describable progression. In other words ... because of the artifacts they've discovered, that may be the start of it because if it's true that we all came from Africa, then in a sense we're all together. — *White male, 60s, residence unknown*

What Is African American Culture?

Some interviewees stressed the inadvisability of putting parameters around African American culture, noting that the concept is not monolithic or well-defined. One reason for the vagueness of the African American identity is that African Americans do not have the cultural ties to their homeland enjoyed by other immigrant groups. Another is the existence of many regional, generational, ethnic, class, and other distinctions within the African American community as a whole.

- ❖ There are a lot of generalizations about our black culture. You can't put it in a box because our cultural ties were broken when we came over from Africa. So a lot of times in the African American community, we had our African background

culture, but we might have been living near a German community, so we accepted some of those things. We weren't tied to a hard-and-fast, core cultural identity because the African bonds had been broken; [whereas] these people—the German and Irish—still had core commitments to the country they emigrated from. It wasn't like that for us. To a large extent the African American culture can't be encapsulated. You'll find that it is kind of blurry. ... I had a conversation with a sergeant when I was in the military about soul food. He said, "What is this soul food stuff? Because what they call soul food—I've been eating that for years." (He was from the South.) A lot of folks eat that [kind of food]; but maybe we ate more of it because it's all we could afford. A lot of white folks, too. It was about what you could afford, and you would fix it up to make do. It probably wasn't healthy, but it sure did taste good. The point I'm trying to make is that you do have that cultural blurring. When you start talking about African American culture, you have to focus on the "American" part as well. Once they were liberated or freed or escaped, some of the slaves joined Indian tribes. That culture became immersed. Those things ought to be highlighted—we have shared cultures here. I would say that is a point of strength; I don't know if [other] people see it like that. — *African American male, 50s, local (originally from Montgomery, Alabama)*

- ❖ If you want to know about European immigrants before [they came] from Great Britain, you know their whole history—a thousand years of it. But [about] certain areas of Africa, before the immigrants came here, we don't know very much. You're not sure what countries they came from; maybe [you know just] the area. — *African American male, 18, local*
- ❖ The word "African" is modifying "American." So "African American" I take to mean the experience in America. — *White male, 30s, from Alexandria*
- ❖ [African American history] is in many ways tragic, and in many ways beautiful. ... But it is a history that is often stripped and [that] has robbed the black people of themselves. It is not taught in the right way to black people; they are not given access to teach themselves. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*
- ❖ In an African American museum, I would like to see the evolution of African Americans: their origins; how they became American; what they have that is unique. — *White female, 50s, from Virginia*
- ❖ African Americans are not a homogenous community. You have poor, rich, middle class, professionals, and "thug culture." How do you capture all that in one building? — *African American female, 50s, local*
- ❖ [Show] stories from the people that the museum is actually supposed to be about and for. Include the many communities that are often silenced, extra silenced, *within* the black community—religious, queers. Don't minimize the diversity of the black community, which often happens. — *White (Jewish) male, teens, local*

- ❖ I know there are some groups in the United States today who still maintain African traditions—like the Gullah. It would be interesting to see how some of those traditions are still practiced. — *White female, 40s, from Colorado*
- ❖ I had two previous wives that could be considered to be African Americans, but they're Hispanic. Their culture really wasn't associated with African American history in the sense that African Americans think of their history ... Their history was Hispanic. My first wife was from Panama, and the people [there] are very mixed race. She was very dark, her father was very, very dark, but she was of mixed race. A lot of people who built the Panama Canal were from Jamaica and from the Caribbean. My second wife was from Puerto Rico, and her family was also very mixed, like many people are in Puerto Rico. My present wife is from the Dominican Republic, but she's sort of mixed too, but doesn't really appear black. We live in Capitol Heights, [which] is around 95 percent of African American heritage. ... Hispanic people that have very, very black features don't tend to think of themselves as being black in the sense that American blacks think of themselves as being black, even if they are only one-quarter black. ... They think of themselves as being from the country they come from. People mix racially very easily without very much stigma. Here in the US there is still *lots* of tension there. So it's much more comfortable with those kinds of relationships in the Hispanic countries because ... there aren't these walls up between people. But here it's much more difficult, and that's why I'm just not very involved in that culture. — *White male, 50s, local*
- ❖ Within the African American population, there are African American French, people from Africa who live here, people from the Caribbean, Latino African American. I'd like to see the differences in the art they produce and the social movements they have caused. — *White male, 20s, local*
- ❖ Then we come to what they consider the “bourgeois black,” where blacks had their own society. And basically it was a little more discriminatory than the Caucasian one. Blacks were born [into the bourgeois society] and were expected to be a doctor, lawyer, dentist—that was a good thing to be, you were somebody. You don't want to be like this little nappy-haired kid running wild; you had a goal in life. This is what you were born to be. — *African American male, 60s, local*

Are Separate Ethnic Museums Desirable?

One issue brought up in a number of interviews was the differing attitudes toward museums that spotlight a particular race or ethnicity. Some interviewees expressed a level of discomfort with such museums, seeing them as exclusionary, divisive, prone to politicization, or simply too narrow to be of much interest.

- ❖ I guess my reservation would be, why would there be an *American* Museum of Art, and also an *African American* Museum of Art...? What are you trying to say there ...? Are you trying to say the African American experience shouldn't be in the American museum ...? Why does it need to be separated...? I would say that's a political statement, to separate it. ... A bigger building with the whole American experience in total would be better, in my opinion. ... It would sadden me to see stuff from African American history taken out of the other museums for this new museum. If you have more stuff [not on display] that can be displayed, great. But I wouldn't take it out of somewhere else and move it [to the new museum] because that would be a big statement. [*Q: So you think an African American museum is okay as long as it is not weakening the other Smithsonian museums that are dedicated to telling the whole American story?*] Right. If you are going through the American History Museum, you still have to get that African American experience. Then maybe there's a little sign that says, "For more, go to NMAAHC." But if you pull it out, that's a huge statement. — *White female, 30s, from Nebraska*
- ❖ They are either Americans or Africans. ... I don't buy the hyphenated-American stuff. I accept it, but I just don't buy it. I don't think anyone's hyphenated-American. You're either are [American], or you're not. — *White male, 30s, from Alexandria*
- ❖ I suppose [an African American Museum] could be seen as divisive. I don't think of it that way, but maybe I should be cognizant of that possibility. ... I mean, I enjoy going to the National Museum of Women in the Arts, and it doesn't bother me that that is separate. [*Q: But you were thinking that some people might think, "Why do they need their own museum?"*] Well, no; more that African Americans might look at it and say, "Well, why are we separate? We're part of the whole American experience. Why would you separate us as somehow being *different*? We're absolutely a part of it." — *White female, 30s, from San Diego*
- ❖ I think it hurts. I personally don't think it's that important to be concerned about your [ethnic] background [or] to continually emphasize that. I don't think it is a good idea; it just tends to make people stay in their own group. ... In other places that I've lived, primarily in Puerto Rico, people are not very conscious of that at all. It's not just black and white, but Asian people ... a mixture of races there. People aren't very concerned about staying in their own little group. But here, you're very concerned about staying in your own little group. People [of different races] sort of mix, but not real comfortably. When you emphasize that *strong* history—which is pretty distant history for most African Americans—I don't really think that is a positive thing. — *White male, 50s, local*
- ❖ There's all sorts of accomplishments, from all the immigrants. ... We are all immigrants, unless we're Native American. It's political, isn't it? *White female, 50s, from Indiana*

- ❖ I doubt if the African American cohort has a long and engrossing enough history to merit an expensive museum. — *White female, 50s, local (originally from Eastern Europe)*
- ❖ You have Africans in every country in the world. We are international born and raised, no matter what we call ourselves. We all come from the same single womb. We could be [called] “American blacks,” “Afro American”—[but] for me, even though they have that distinction, I have always considered myself an American, because I was born and raised here. I hate when I see on an application, “What’s your race?” What does it matter? ... Diversity; we all come from ships, but we’re all in the same boat now. How can we bring our different backgrounds together to live in peace and harmony, to all get along? How can we grow together? — *African American male, 60s, local*
- ❖ I would never go to a African American museum on its own. ... Probably I don’t care about the issue; it’s not relevant to my life since I am not African American. I mean, outside of looking at it as another culture, it’s not appealing to me. ... Of course I’m interested in it to the extent that African Americans are part of our culture, but I [do] not have the interest to look into their culture beyond what is relevant to our lives. ... [So I wouldn’t visit a museum like NMAAHC] by choice, unless there was a special exhibit; if it was something about music, sports, or some period of history, that might catch my interest. — *White female, 20s, from New York*
- ❖ I love the American Indian Museum, but a lot of people think that Native Americans only exist within museums. So don’t exotify black Americans or any culture to the point where I am looking at [an object] in a museum and not understanding that this is real, alive. A lot of white people might get caught up in that if they were to do that to this museum. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*

Others, however, were emphatic that such museums were not only justified as a gesture of the nation’s respect for its various ethnic sub-cultures, but also serve to promote better understanding among different races and peoples. Others noted that such museums need not necessarily (or even primarily) be targeted toward members of the groups they represent, but rather can be of interest and benefit to everyone.

- ❖ Let’s be honest; this society is not that unified, and there are so many racial issues simmering under the surface. We need as much education as we can get, to understand each other. To have a museum for Native Americans is fantastic. They were the original Americans, and look what we did to them because we didn’t understand. Look at the black experience back in the Jim Crow days: my father and mother could tell you horror stories about growing up in Pennsylvania. So for people to say we don’t need this [museum], we don’t need to understand—I just don’t buy it. It’s important to learn as much as we can. If it helps you to understand why people are the way they are, why should anyone begrudge that ...? — *African American female, 50s, local*

- ❖ I believe that the African culture should be acknowledged in this country. ... The fact that they were brought to America and kept as slaves is bad enough. I am happy for humanity's sake that there was a movement to free the slaves, and I also think that [it] is a shame for humanity that until 60 years ago, black people did not have the rights of other American citizens. So it is definitely time to acknowledge that they are part of this society and they do indeed have a culture that needs to be known. We need to give them space and we need to give them the time of day. ... Why did we build a museum for the American Indians? Because they are part of American culture. It is one of the ways that America is acknowledging and recognizing the fact that only by putting the pieces together can [we] present a real face of who America really is. ... The fact that the Japanese-Americans were persecuted and worked in camps should be acknowledged. ... It's about time to take responsibility and acknowledge that we made mistakes, and I hope that we won't make mistakes in the future. I totally believe that there should be a museum acknowledging the Latinos' contributions. — *White female, 60s, from Los Angeles*
- ❖ Different points of view would attract us to the museum. Because you have your own point of view from your background, and to learn of others' points of view helps you become more understanding of each other. And I think it's quite a big thing. Features, displays, the impact of music—rap, hip-hop, black artists working in music—anything that promotes a bit more respect for a culture. I think it's still a very much “them and us” in whatever culture you think of. If you have more museums like this it will give you more of an understanding. — *White female, 30s, from London, England*
- ❖ It would show that the community cares about African American culture. It would show more interest. And I guess more people would like it and probably would get involved. — *African American male, 20s, from North Carolina*
- ❖ I want an Asian one too! The Holocaust Museum is dedicated to the Jews and their sufferings, and lots of people know about slavery; but not as many people know about Japanese internment, how Chinese people were oppressed in California—they couldn't do anything, had no employment ... bring attention to those minority groups who also suffered a lot. Make sure kids learn about it! — *Asian-American female, 20s, from California*
- ❖ The museum should be for everybody. Because it is about African American history, of course it makes sense to show African American people's achievements. But if I see an African American who succeeds greatly at something, I would be equally stimulated and equally admiring of that person. It is not necessarily that only black people would say “How great!”, but everybody. — *White female, 30s, from Alexandria*

- ❖ If a museum of this type opens, it should extend a wide welcome to everyone, and become a place that invites, not divides, people. — *White female, 60s, from Mississippi*

African American Contributions and Progress

Two themes that recurred in many of the discussions of African American identity were the need to focus on how African Americans have influenced the wider American culture and society of which they are a part, and how far they have progressed despite the enormous obstacles and oppression they have faced.

Influence on American Culture

One aspect of these themes was the collective mark that African Americans have left on the nation through the centuries, and how their culture has shaped the face of America as a whole.

- ❖ What would the United States be like if there wasn't an African American component to it? It would be empty—not totally empty, [but] it would be really different. It wouldn't be as rich. — *White female, 60s, local*
- ❖ [African Americans] shaped where America is today. If things had gone differently—no emancipation, or whatever—then we would be living in a very different country and society. So in that regard it impacts me. — *White male, 30s, from Alexandria*
- ❖ [*Q: Why would you want to visit an African American museum, in the absence of any personal connection?*] Because it's part of the history of America. It's part of the culture of America—the culture that I live in today. — *White female, 40s, from New York*
- ❖ The message should be loud and clear: We are part of American society, we came with our own heritage, we are keeping our roots, we are proud of who we are. We are integrated into society, more or less; it took us over 200 years to be accepted, but we are here to stay. So you guys better get used to the idea. ... They might be a minority in terms of numbers but they are an integral part of this society. — *White female, 60s, from Los Angeles*
- ❖ I guess [African American history is interesting to me] because it is just such a strong component of American culture, and it's unexplained and unexplored to some extent. — *White female, 30s, from San Diego*
- ❖ Focus on the contributions black Americans made in establishing the United States as it is today. There is not enough focus on some of the important things we have done as a race of people. For example, I never knew that a black man invented the Internet, and look at its place in society today! It is integral to how we are surviving. Things like that—how we have established the core of society. — *African American couple, 30s, local*

- ❖ As a black man, [I'd like to see] the black contributions to America. Most people don't know who invented the traffic light, who designed DC, how much you can get from a peanut. — *African American male, 60s, local*

Individual Achievements

People spoke of their desire to see and hear the stories of individual black Americans who have achieved great things, in many cases against long odds. Not surprisingly, the barrier breakers—the first African Americans to hold a certain office, achieve a particular distinction, or succeed in a particular field of endeavor—were frequently mentioned in this context. This theme was sometimes tied into a larger story about the social and economic progress—albeit fitful and uneven—of African Americans as a whole.

- ❖ Everything from the first black Supreme Court judge to Obama for president—the leadership side. — *African American male, 20s, from North Carolina*
- ❖ I'm interested in achievers or overachievers—like Oprah. People who made it against the odds. Nowadays it's different; it's cool to listen to rap and violent, sexually explicit music. ... So I would like to see that you can achieve and succeed without being a rapper. — *White female, 20s, from Chicago*
- ❖ [I would like to see the] gains in terms of the first African Americans as governors and mayors, and in which cities and states. The history of black individuals who got into politics and moved forward—the first black senator, first secretary of a [federal] agency, first CEO, first black historical colleges or universities. Blacks in the space program. Inventions that black people played a part in, like the black guy who assisted the heart surgeon. — *African American couple, 30s, local*
- ❖ When the first black person won an Oscar, you could see how thrilling it was for other black actors and just the black community in general. When you say “This is the first women who did this” or “The first person of a certain nationality who did this,” it is like marking an event. You have always had acting or sports or music or other fields where African American people have been really successful. I think that shows that there should not be a difference between African Americans and other Americans, and color is not a limit to achievement. — *White female, 30s, from Alexandria*
- ❖ [Show] black contributions to this country and the world, even within the context of a lot of suffering and struggling. Also how black people have survived, and are really giving and doing amazing things to this society and the world. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*
- ❖ They are very much a piece of our whole society, and in the last 20 years it's been amazing, with the whole integration of the society. As much as you hear about

racism, I think that facts belie some of that. We see a huge increase in [African American] income and economic levels and buying power and all of those things. And of course you probably have to do something on Black Entertainment TV and Robert Johnson, who has got to be one of the richest people in America. ... There's a guy who I think was descended from slaves, went to Princeton and that's all she wrote from there on. Him and his wife, because she's a very big part of his story. They are very successful entrepreneurs. — *White female, 60s, local*

- ❖ For me, coming from a [formerly] communist country, I relate a little bit [to Martin Luther King]—in the sense of having a revolution and changing things that affect you. It's not like I contributed to the revolution in Romania, but it was that feeling, when things are changing, that courage and sacrifice made these changes possible. So in a sense, I connect to that sense of change, sense of revolution, sense of betterment [and] the improvement of your ideals and the overcoming of tyranny and discrimination. — *White female, 30s, from Alexandria*

The Present

Interviewees expressed strong interest in NMAAHC, including contemporary topics and issues. In addition to general commentary on various aspects of contemporary society (such as religion, politics, and international connections), three main themes emerged from the interviews:²

- (1) The socioeconomic legacy of the past: how it affects the present and what remains unchanged
- (2) The contemporary challenges African American face, such as urban poverty and inadequate education
- (3) The lack of awareness, understanding, and exposure to African Americans among other Americans.

The Past in the Present

Despite some progress, African Americans do not have equal rights and opportunities. While many people acknowledged the progress that has been made in redressing racism and discrimination, there was near-universal agreement that these persist. Some commented on the discrimination and racism other minorities now face in the United States.

- ❖ One hundred and forty years after the end of slavery, the residual effects are still there. You see the inner cities and the anger in a lot of African Americans; some of them are very angry. — *Asian American female, 40s, local*
- ❖ There are still a lot of places where there is racism. If you live in the city there is less racism, I think. But if you go in the country, you have racism in certain areas. In Savannah, in certain areas there are white people there, and in certain areas there are black people. — *Asian female, 20s, from Georgia (originally from South Korea)*
- ❖ [Contemporary society is] tragic and beautiful. It is important to have that balance, to recognize that the struggle is still very much there, and even though people like to say it has gotten so much better since civil rights, most people who are actually affected by it would tell you it's gotten worse. Be it poverty, gentrification, police brutality, be it the military industrial complex, be it problems with education, the war on drugs—all of that. But to talk about hip-hop

² Arranging the comments by these themes, it must be noted, tends to put a negative spin on the present situation of African Americans. Interviewees also often emphasized the progress that has been made, which is addressed above and elsewhere in this report.

- as a contemporary movement, it is beautiful, along with those contemporary issues. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*
- ❖ When we first came to our small community (in the Atlanta area), we were disturbed that the white element and the African American element never merged, they never did things together. We belong to a Presbyterian church without *one* black family. And so African Americans still have a long way to go. ... If it wasn't for Jesse Jackson and the others, that one black kid [in Jena, Louisiana]—he would have been in prison for life, probably. — *White couple, 60s, from Georgia*
 - ❖ Sports wouldn't be anything without black athletes, but at the same time, how many teams are owned by black people? And how many coaches are blacks? That's an issue. And the fact that often black athletes are commodified and sold as if they are products. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*
 - ❖ I was always raised with the principle—my grandmother was a southern woman—that you can't be as good as them, you have to be better. You have to go out there and compete in the world. You have to be educated. — *African American male, 60s, local*
 - ❖ [T] his business of these six people [in Jena] ... that is what I was saying—there is still a big, big, big undertone of discrimination against not only blacks, but Hispanics right now. — *White couple, 60s, from Georgia*
 - ❖ I just feel people discount too many people because they're Asian, they're Black. ... I'm of Irish and Scottish descent ... and as you come to this country, you're all knocked down. It's not worthy of humanness. I hate to see injustice for any reason. — *White male, 50s, Rhode Island*
 - ❖ The context of the history—not just the historical facts, but why things happened the way they did, and how it affected the world's structure today. And how other people were affected and incorporated into black history, like the obvious connection to white people and other people of color. And how they tie into the whole context, how and why it happened, how it is affecting us today. Within that, the radical history should be included and highlighted. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*
 - ❖ OK, how much of that discrimination is gone and how much still exists? How it is it now compared to back then? To me personally, if I am really honest, my personal opinion is that there is still discrimination—not as visible, not as bad as it used to be—but, yeah, it's there still, more or less. Even if it's positive discrimination, in the sense that we make an effort not to discriminate; but somehow there is still discrimination. People don't put an equal sign consciously or subconsciously between a black American and a white person. ... Some people think they don't discriminate; but they do actually. So I don't think it is all

abolished in all the layers of society. But yes, it is much better than in Martin Luther King's day. ... In the United Kingdom, I had more of a sense of non-discrimination. They really don't make a difference, and they look at a black person the same as at a white person. — *White female, 30s, from Alexandria*

- ❖ [African Americans] sometimes are overwhelmed by their color—more than even the white people tend to discriminate against them. They almost discriminate [against] themselves. They kind of take it as a given that “I'm not supposed to do well in school,” “I'm not supposed to do this,” “I'm expected not to perform well in anything I do because I am black.” ... Then I would also put a big emphasis on the well-spread opinion is that most of the black people are trouble makers, which is absolutely not true. What is true is that only the trouble makers will make the front page and have 15 minutes of fame. But there are a lot of very well-educated people of African American descent who are in a position of power, whether it is in the business world or political worlds. — *White female, 60s, from Los Angeles*
- ❖ Understanding everything about slavery and the efforts made—and not made—to have [blacks] as equal members of society 140 years later. — *White male, 20s, local*
- ❖ Certainly [show] the Civil Rights Movement and how that started out, the history of that. That's a positive from a negative experience. [Show] how that has changed things, and also what hasn't changed. — *White female, 60s, local*
- ❖ If the United States had taken FDR seriously, we'd be dealing with many of these things, and we would not have to deal with many of these problems we're talking about now. ... We would truly be a society that was melded together. — *White couple, 60s, from Georgia*

Some Contemporary Challenges

Interviewees commented, sometimes in response to a word association prompt, on the ongoing issues African Americans face in certain areas of life, most notably, continued marginalization (particularly the urban poor), the breakdown of the family, the poor quality of the education available to African Americans, and the double-edged sword of the military. There were also many comments about the lack of awareness and understanding of who African Americans are and what has formed them, and a hope that NMAAHC will address that.

Marginalization

- ❖ [We] have so many blacks marginalized, in ghettos. They often feel very marginalized from the rest of the society. We have to work on that. It's never a

good idea to have a large segment of the population marginalized from society. It's coming slowly, but not fast enough. — *White female, 60s, local*

- ❖ And I think it would be really good if it ended up with a presentation of the African Americans' plight *today*. I saw a television program about Anacostia, and there were young black people engaged in a wonderful project to rehabilitate the river and the trees and plants nearby. But one of their biggest problems was that [people in that community] were being *murdered* at the rate of at least 125 per year. So history is important to help understand why this is going on now. — *White male, age unknown, Australia*
- ❖ I would include social issues, and when I say social, I mean how we live in the US. Like demographics ... how a lot of us are in poverty, or on welfare. I guess that when we were slaves, we were held back, but now it's time to start improving socially, taking greater steps on improving socially. — *African American male, 20s, from North Carolina*
- ❖ I think it still continues today—African Americans continue to struggle. They are all sectioned off in areas, poor neighborhoods, like a trap. The local schools are funded through [their taxes], but they don't make that much money. It's a continuing struggle. Horrible. — *Asian-American male, 20s, from California*
- ❖ I would be interested in seeing why [so many African Americans] still live in poverty, even after they had all these positive [programs] like affirmative action. Who are the people who succeed, and who are the people who don't, and why? If there is any structural inequality and why? That kind of thing. ... Is this really a sociological problem, or is it more at the individual level? I would like to understand that. — *White female, 20s, from Chicago*

Family: Its Importance and Its Breakdown

- ❖ Over the years I've seen ... a lot of things tear at [at our families]. Maybe that should be placed in context—how many single households we have now, versus in the 1940s and 1950s. [In the past] you had to have a tight bond to actually survive because the external factors packing against you were so intense. If you didn't have that strong nuclear core, you wouldn't have the energy to face the next day and the next day and the next day. Because typically you'd come back to your community, and your family would revitalize your energy and give you the spirit and the focus to face that same situation over again, and [you would say] "Hopefully, it will be better for my kids." What happened then is that the bonds of family started breaking for a variety of reasons, and consequently that nuclear family capability that we had before—that would reenergize us and keep people on the straight and narrow and keep people moving with a sense of purpose—was no longer there. So now you have these short-term focuses—everybody gets everything, they get the houses, the cars, all this stuff right away. You saw that in

my parents, in a lot of parents in our neighborhood; ... they called it lower middle-income, [but it was] probably low income. But you saw it in a lot of families—fathers and mothers working hard, trying to take care of the kids despite things working against them. — *African American male, 50s, local (originally from Montgomery, Alabama)*

- ❖ It's all based on "You do better than I did." I mean, my dad and mom graduated from high school, but my grandfather was *illiterate*. His oldest daughter taught him to read, because he didn't have the opportunity to go to school. He made sure all his children went through high school, and except for the two boys, who went to work, all the girls got college degrees and became teachers. So when you look at that history from slavery on, it's all about getting educated and helping your brothers and sisters, and pulling up the next generation. It's all tied into the American experience. — *African American female, 50s, local*
- ❖ There are often a lot of broken families, at least among people living in poverty. The black community has to work with that. — *White female, 60s, local*
- ❖ [Show] how important family is to the African American population. How family really is where it's at: being with your family and spending quality time with them, doing everything for them. It's such a huge thing. Families are omnipresent. — *African American male, 60s, local*
- ❖ That's probably their [African Americans'] weakest point: they don't have this family thing, and it's got to be brought into their systems for family. But I think that the family is weakened across the whole spectrum in America. — *White male, 60s, from Wisconsin*
- ❖ Right now there is a terrible problem with so many single black women raising their children, or grandparents raising their children, and the black males abandoning their position. But I think society probably is going to put enough pressure on this so that it's going to change. So they are going to have to look at themselves and change this... heretofore they have always had strong families, but it's just recently—well, I don't know what "recently" means, but it hasn't always been that way. — *White couple, 60s, from Georgia*

The Military: A Double-edged Sword

- ❖ There's probably a higher proportion of African Americans in the military than there are whites, Asians, and Hispanics, and some of that may be because there aren't job opportunities for African Americans where they are. That's a heavy price to pay, but sometimes it's a leg up. — *White female, 60s, local*
- ❖ War, and going to war. How some people are unfairly put in war. I have been thinking lately about how unfair it is, how in the past it used to be that going into

the military used to be the way for people who couldn't afford to go to school to remedy that. But now they are putting their lives at risk because every branch of the military is in the war. I think it is really affecting the low-income populations. In wartime, what do minorities? They come from a place that can't afford education. How is our system going to help them? — *African American male, 60s, local*

- ❖ The sacrifices African Americans have made for this country, even when they are treated badly—in the Revolution, Civil War, World Wars, Korean War, Vietnam. To this day, black lives are not valued as much as white lives, but still black lives have been lost to defend the purity, sanctity, whatever, of this country. I doubt that will get into the museum. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*

The Disservice That Is Education

- ❖ The westernization of education and how that affects black views. And also the degradation of inner schools that are often mostly comprised of people of color. Lack of resources and lack of attention, lack of meaningful curricula, lack of black history. And that relates to the treatment of youth in general in this country, and especially youth of color. Their voices are just not valued as they should be. And that definitely ties in to why there might be failures in the education system and in turn the blame on children—like when people talk about intelligence gaps and achievement gaps, instead of what is causing those gaps. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*
- ❖ Something about education and how it hasn't served the African American population in urban areas in the US throughout history. That's such an important theme. I would say how it doesn't serve minorities in the entire country, but since it is an African American museum, talk about black people. It makes sense to me and applies to my life [as a teenager].
- ❖ I will tell you what I'm not proud about in African American culture, and that is affirmative action. That I am totally against. By reserving some places, giving them an opportunity to go to colleges just because they are African Americans and not because they can qualify, it is offensive. It's telling them that you are not good enough. But because [we feel] guilty, we are going to make it up for you. I think that is very offensive... You cannot keep me shackled for all those years, and you cannot humiliate me, you cannot treat me as a slave and a few years later you say, "Oops, let me compensate you." You think you can compensate me by humiliating me again? By telling me that you are not good enough, and that is why I will let you pass, based on the color of the skin, and I will close my eyes to the fact that you do not have the grades? I think that is public humiliation. — *White female, 60s, from Los Angeles*

A Lack of Awareness and Understanding

Interviewees often discussed (or in some cases, illustrated through their words) how misunderstandings and lack of knowledge about the African American community are still common, and how this presents another hurdle for African Americans to overcome.

- ❖ A few years ago, [my companion] was living in the South—in Alabama—and it was really interesting for me to go on the Civil Rights tour. Coming from [Wisconsin], I hadn't seen that contrast—black and white. I don't think we get that a lot in the North. I think it would be good to have some of that rawness that still exists portrayed here at the national level, for people who come from all over. So people understand that racism is still a real issue. It's not something that we should glaze over and try to pretend is not there. — *White male, 30s, local*
- ❖ An understanding of what is important to African Americans and why, so we don't misunderstand what they say and do. A lot of prejudice exists because of misunderstandings. That should be the purpose of the museum. There is still so much racism. The museum is a way to inform people about things they don't understand. That is why the inclusion of culture is so important. — *African American male, 60s, local*
- ❖ I feel like a lot of stuff the African American community has contributed is viewed negatively by mainstream America, such as hip-hop. It is a large part of our culture, especially for the younger generation. But the [older] generation doesn't view it as an art form. So I definitely want to see more contemporary stuff. — *Asian-American female, 20s, from California*
- ❖ I'm pretty sure the reason African Americans excel in basketball is that you could do that without any equipment and didn't have to belong to a country club. You could go out in your neighborhood, and put up a hoop on the corner, and play basketball. These guys excelled at it because they *couldn't* do anything else. When I was growing up, and certainly when my parents were growing up, you simply *did not have access* to golf courses and tennis courts and swimming pools. You grew up in segregated neighborhoods, and unless you were wealthy, you didn't have access to that stuff. Our schools and neighborhoods didn't have swimming pools or golf teams. That's what I mean about looking into our culture and not understanding the nuances of how we got where we are today. — *African American female, 50s, local*
- ❖ Many people believe that [most] blacks are on social welfare and they are not working. I think there is racism in this country, and I think the message should be that they are making a positive impact. I would be interested in famous people and their impact in the musical field or scientific field. I know there is a lot of discontent about people who stay on welfare, and they are usually either Latinos or Blacks. There are misapprehensions about these communities. — *White female, 20s, from Chicago*

- ❖ For people who look into our culture from the outside, there are a lot of nuances that are missed. I think what museums should do is help fill in those gaps for people. I was giving a talk at my old agency for African American Heritage Month once. I had a whole speech written out, but when I got to the podium, I threw it away. Because just before I got there, I talked to a friend of mine whose daughter had been at school when her teacher decided to talk about slavery. And basically what she said was, “It wasn’t so bad. [Plantation owners] were businessmen, and they were rational, so they wouldn’t beat their slaves, just like you wouldn’t beat your cattle.” I had to address that. ... This teacher didn’t know she was saying anything bad; she didn’t realize that what she was saying was making this little girl absolutely heartsick. [That teacher] needed to be educated; she needed to learn something about slavery and how horrific it was, because she obviously didn’t know. — *African American female, 50s, local*
- ❖ [I haven’t had much personal experience with African American history/culture] in later years of life, but early on we would always celebrate Martin Luther King day at school. We got to school and read through his speech, and the teacher would talk about the importance of what he did and the Civil Rights Movement. But nothing really after that—at least at school. — *Asian-American female, 20s, from Texas*
- ❖ I’d like to walk out of the museum thinking, “What’s next? What should we be thinking about in the future?” I think that would be very important, because of the disparities that still exist in health and social-economic status—things that a lot of people don’t realize. I think it is important to highlight those things, and not just in the manner of statistics, but maybe trying to put [the message] a little more “in your face.” ... I think it is very important to remind people of those inequalities that still exist. — *White male, 30s, local*
- ❖ Highlight the contemporary. When I was in high school, history [classes] ended with the Vietnam War. So everything from Vietnam onward, I’ve had to learn on my own through news or reading. So focus on that more modern history. Get people to step outside of where they are living and look at it in a different light. — *White female, 30s, local*
- ❖ [Q: Have you been to an African American museum or exhibition?] Didn’t they have something in ... one of the museums here ... that was African American? I don’t know. [Q: Personal experiences?] Probably ... not much. I can’t think of anything specific. [Q: Been to an event or participated in anything where there were mostly African Americans?] I’m not sure. Probably not. I guess not. [Q: Exposure?] Not much, no. — *White female, 50s, local*
- ❖ [Talk about] the misunderstandings because of stereotypes—which are true in some cases, but not all. Everyone is not the same, everyone is different; even

though they may look the same or do certain things the same way. — *African American male, 17, local*

- ❖ [That monument to Martin Luther King] kind of took you back to how it was in those years—which may be often hard to imagine, because now we are where we are and we don't struggle with those issues too much, or ever. But it kind of connects you quite strongly to how it was back then and what it meant to fight with these issues which now we take for granted. — *White female, 30s, from Alexandria*
- ❖ I don't know what [African Americans] have to offer. I hope they do have something of value to offer. What I know about their culture is very limited. I know about their contribution to gospel music, to jazz, their contribution to baseball, to sport in general. And if I am looking back at Louisiana, these people have ancient culture. At least their roots are ancient, and I'm sure there are things that are very interesting. ... If I know that little—and I consider myself as being a person that has a tendency towards appreciating art in general—I suppose that people who are even less educated and interested in art than I am will probably know close to nothing. So I believe it is a very good idea to have a museum that will bring their culture out in the open and give them an opportunity to show that they contributed in a positive way. — *White female, 60s, from Los Angeles*

A number of interviewees specifically discussed how their personal background influences their perceptions and knowledge (or lack thereof) of African Americans.

- ❖ Being the WASP that I am, there's so much that I can't identify with, whether in terms of discrimination, in terms of ... the inter-communication between people of that race. There's just a lot that I don't understand or have never been exposed to that I would like to see fleshed out a little bit, in terms I can understand. Sort of like the Football Hall of Fame; if you're a football fan, you're going to have a lot better grasp of the exhibits in there... [By "inter-communication" I mean] in terms of the life within the community. Discrimination comes from without ... how have predominantly African American communities evolved over the years since segregation? ... [Segregation] pushed people into one place, into a very homogeneous environment; and those are the areas [when I was] growing up, [where] it was, "Oh, don't go there, don't go there." A little more insight into what the culture within those communities is. — *White male, 30, from Ohio*
- ❖ I grew up in New York City, so all of my life, I had African American schoolmates. When I rode the subway, it was with people of all races. So it was just natural for me to think that people should have friends of all cultures and races. But if I had grown up somewhere else—maybe in the deep South—I may not have had African American friends, and maybe the culture there would not have wanted my teachers to keep me well-informed about African American culture and history. — *Asian-American female, 40s, local*

- ❖ We have lived in a small town north of Atlanta for 17 years, and the discrimination within that small community has diminished somewhat. Only now, though, are they beginning to recognize the importance of the African Americans to the history of that small community. And things that had been destroyed before are now going to be renovated and included in the history of the community. We just recently opened up a history center for the whole of northeastern Georgia. ... There was no African American history in this museum [when it] was opened, and the people of the community recognized their error and are going back to correct it. So I think that's significant. — *White couple, 60s, from Georgia*
- ❖ I grew up in a mostly white neighborhood, very few blacks. I didn't have black friends. As far as knowing much about what made them different from me, I just thought they were the same as all of us. So, I always grew up with that feeling that there was nothing really different, they were having the same struggles that I was. ... I did know people who were in the Gray [sic] Panthers and did the protests. I was a bit young for that ... but I did know people who participated in those protests and made their voices heard. That's probably what your museum will focus on: the slavery and the civil rights and striving for equality. ... I didn't grow up in the South where it was so evident; it wasn't really an issue. — *White female, 50, from Indiana*
- ❖ I grew up in California, so we were pretty liberal from day one. Integration wasn't that big of a deal. It was more a big deal in the rest of the United States than it was in California. So the experience wasn't as dramatic as other places. — *White female, 40s, from San Diego*
- ❖ I come from a very white community in the Midwest, but for me, the issues of race exist and are becoming more dynamic now, with the growing Latino population. It's not just blacks and whites anymore; it's much more mixed than it was 50 years ago. And I think it's going to become more contentious as we move down the road, and as we become even more of a melting pot. — *White male, 30s, local*
- ❖ I don't believe in this thing that the [descendants of] slaves should be reimbursed for what happened, because it happens. I'm Irish, and my family came over as part of the Irish famine. Most of us worked for 10 or 15 years as indentured workers to get over here. I mean, everyone worked to get here. It's America, and you can do whatever you want with what you [have]. — *White male, 60s, from Wisconsin*

Other Aspects of Contemporary Society

Religion

- ❖ Religion is one of the things that has provided a backbone and a source of hope. If you've been to a black church or a black Muslim gathering, you see what a release it is—a structure for struggle really, for release, healing. Because there aren't many other places that black Americans can go to escape and heal. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*
- ❖ I visited a Jamaican church a while ago. The expression [of religion there] differs from the white culture—or at least the more standardized white culture. — *White female, 40s, from California*
- ❖ It's Christianity, but it's Christianity with a difference. Show how that is different from [mainstream] Christianity. — *White male, age unknown, Australia*
- ❖ Talk about the religions that came from different cultures in Africa—how they melded and blended the religion they brought with them with what was already here. — *African American male, 60s, local*
- ❖ Southern Baptist spirituality. It is fascinating. It's very different from Denver, where I grew up: Catholic, austere—the religions that I grew up with. Southern Baptist seems so excited. — *White male, 20s, local*
- ❖ [Religion] is an important point that I didn't think about. How religion in African American culture plays such a huge role, and has forever. People have always been looking for different ways to satisfy them spiritually, and Christianity was that thing for them. — *White female, 18, local*

International Connections

- ❖ I'd like to see something on influences from the United States to overseas, and vice-versa. DC has a big immigrant population—2nd and 3rd generation immigrants. How do they influence each other? How have different cultures been influenced by each other—especially with food? — *African American male, 17, local*
- ❖ The countries that immigrated here—where the people go and what they end up doing. ... For example, Ethiopia. Why here instead of Europe? Why DC instead of California? We have the largest Ethiopian population outside of Ethiopia. — *African American male, 60s, local*

- ❖ I suppose [because of its “national” status, the museum] will focus on civil rights. But it would be nice to find something different. For example, in Africa there are communities where the people are striving to survive. That’s beyond what this probably should do; but [the Smithsonian does] do a lot of international exhibits. — *White female, 50s, from Indiana*
- ❖ [Show] some of the great heroes of South Africa: Desmond Tutu and all of those heroes. And some of the scary stuff; I guess you would have to deal with some of the scary stuff that happens in Africa—Darfur and places like that. I wouldn’t like to see a lot of that; it’s something I would have to skip over in a museum. ... I mean, yeah, fine to show them; but I wouldn’t want to end up in a Holocaust museum kind of thing. — *White female, 60s, local*

Politics

- ❖ You can look at [politics] in two ways. There’s involvement in the actual official political system. And there is black politics—the politics of how communities are organized, how they relate to the political system in terms of what you do within your community in response to things—the radical black political discourse like MOVE, the Black Panthers, etc. All of that is black politics. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*
- ❖ [Show] black Americans in politics. That’s very important, because now you do have a wonderful chance: for the first time, perhaps, you have a candidate for the presidency who is black and who might have a chance to get elected. — *White male, 50s, from Germany*
- ❖ Obama. African Americans have come a long way, at least on the surface; they are more mainstream. — *White male, 20s, local*
- ❖ There’s been some talk about certain presidents with African-American blood. [Show] the history of black individuals who got into politics and moved forward; like the first black senator. — *African American couple, 30s, local*
- ❖ [Politics is] interesting this year. It will be very interesting to see how Obama does. His being African American [is not an issue]; it is really interesting how well he’s doing. But I don’t know how the rest of the country feels about it—being from DC distorts [your perspective]. He seems to be doing really well. That’s a positive sign, even if he doesn’t win. — *White female, 60s, local*
- ❖ The presumption [in politics is] that blacks are different than whites and that they are always getting into trouble. So my comment is that when I see any politician, any *person*, getting involved in something that is illegal, it’s bad. But I do think that what happens is [when the person involved is] the minority, the black, [the] homosexual—the whole garbage can comes out at one time. So, when you look at

politics, you gotta make sure that you stay clean. — *White couple, 60s, from Georgia*

The Voices and Stories of Ordinary People

There was considerable interest among interviewees in hearing about and from “ordinary people.” Three points stood out:

- (1) The importance of giving voice to the many diverse groups of African Americans;
- (2) Telling the stories of ordinary people and their persistence and resilience in the face of the extraordinary challenges posed by slavery, racism, and prejudice; and
- (3) People have a wealth of stories they want to share.

Giving Voice to Ordinary People

Many interviewees spontaneously expressed a fascination with hearing some of the anonymous voices that collectively make up African American history.

- ❖ It doesn't always have to be someone that's achieved [great things], but [it could be] someone that's kept a job for 35 years. It could be the street sweeper of Washington, DC ... there's so many that saw a challenge and met it. You can meet many people. They wouldn't have to be the Obamas or Martin Luther Kings, but good solid people in the world that can be a living example not only for other African Americans, but also for anyone to say, “He perceived difficulty and he overcame.” So it wouldn't necessarily have to be the name brand somebody, but the common guy. The preacher that has been at the same church for 35 years and led his flock day in and day out. The challenges that he would have met along the way. ... to me that would be an example of a person you would want to emulate. The kind of person you would want to see in the African American museum is the kind of person you want to emulate. You want the human connection. — *White female, 50s, residence unknown*
- ❖ [At the Cincinnati] Underground Railroad Museum ... I was struck by the actual voices of the people, their stories. What I think is most important when you are making a museum about people who have been oppressed is to give their voices. All the exhibits should be organized and run by those people. All aspects should be decided by black Americans. ... There are so many voices—young people of color, women of color, queer people of color—that are just building spaces in themselves. And in a national museum, those [voices] might be small nooks, but it would be really powerful if you stretch out. ... [And at the Holocaust Museum in Israel] there are other parts of the museum that are just completely spiritual, personal; [there are] stories that you can be touched [by] and actually touch. Clear, concrete. And a large part devoted to personal stories and accounts, human emotions. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*

- ❖ There are different paths of growth—and everyone’s story should be told in the museum. — *African American male, 60s, local*
- ❖ I immediately think of some of the traditions we shared in my own family going back many generations, like how my great grandparents did things. Just the way we celebrate different holidays; just a little focus on that. — *African American couple, 30s, local*
- ❖ I wish there were ways for someone to come to the museum to record their memories of someone who was not a star [and] who demonstrated that kind of commitment to principle and ability to four-squarely continue on their path. Kind of like the unsung heroes. Because we’re already going to hear about Michael Jordan and everyone who’s already famous and how much money they have. The other end of the spectrum needs to be honored. And [like] the exhibit with the different tribes [at the National Museum of the American Indian], when they talk about what they find valuable. When I think of women in church, that circle of support that was not recognized and was unofficial and was not instituted in any organized way in terms of government support. But there were those support systems ... those informal but socially structured groups that supported people through terrible times but were not recognized. — *White female, 50s, Arkansas*
- ❖ [Tell about] how African Americans live, socialize. How we relate to mainstream society—the African American perspective. — *African American couple, 30s, local*

The Importance of the Stories Ordinary People Have to Tell

Many times people responded to questions either by saying how important the stories of ordinary people are or with their own personal accounts. It was clear that story-telling needs to be part of the museum.

- ❖ I would like to see less of the slavery and the slave ships and more of the social history—the amazing social history of African Americans since slavery. To me that’s the most amazing thing—how far people have come despite the things that happened to them when they came here and the reasons they came here. We’re on a fast track now. I would like to see a lot of third generation people either talking of things they do or things they’ve done. That sort of thing. — *White female, 60s, local*
- ❖ [A depiction of the accomplishments of African Americans] actually carries more of an impact if it’s just ordinary people. — *African American female, 50s, local*
- ❖ Tell everyday stories—make it personal. — *White male, 50s, local*

- ❖ I like to see things where people's stories are told. I think that that always makes more interesting; that kind of gets you more on the emotional level. ... people's stories, such as oral histories, [and] things along those lines. That's what I would gravitate to. ... [And] not necessarily famous [stories], but more the personal stories. I think of, like Ellis Island and things, you know, the stories of people coming to this country, things like that. — *White female, 40s, from California*

- ❖ I'd like, probably, the sports thing. I'd go in there because there might be fabulous pictures of athletes doing incredible things, and there also might be stories being told by those athletes about how they grew up and where they grew up and how they got into the sport. Because a lot of those people have somebody really special who took an interest in them in school and took them out on a track maybe and showed them how. ... There's a lot of that, and that would be an inspiring, interesting thing. — *White female, 60s, local*

- ❖ The culture has changed so much now ... [I remember] the simplicity that I saw in the character of a lot of those people who were willing to make a sacrifice [during the Civil Rights Movement]. ... They were not PhDs, people who were going to inherit something off Wall Street. ... They had so much dignity, and I think that was overlooked. It bothers me today that our idols are Paris Hilton and American Idol and stuff like that. People should be idolized because of the virtue they possess inherently. — *African American male, 50s, local (originally from Montgomery, Alabama)*

- ❖ In Montgomery, I was very young, but one of the historical indelible marks that people have in their past was the march from Selma to Montgomery. The thing that I remember culturally that I thought was significant was the fact that you could see how people in America cared; that's what impressed me so much as a kid, African American. I was always idealistic, even as a kid, and didn't understand how things could be wrong and people couldn't make them right. ... We had the freedom riders there; some of the marchers came to the house, and they were white; ... it impressed me so much that they cared enough to come down here to protest. That's when you realize that we live in such a great country. You've got people [willing] to sacrifice and make commitments to make it better. It always stuck with me. I remember as a kid—and I just mentioned this to someone the other day because of the march down in Louisiana ... I remember as a kid when Viola Liuzzo was murdered. She was a white housewife in Chicago. ... She cared enough to leave the comfort of her home to come down there to participate in this march. And it was some Klansmen; they killed her, she was driving her car. ... That just stuck with me. It impressed and inspired me that people cared so much. Things like that, those common incidents, those common things that occurred throughout our culture and throughout the Civil Rights Movement ... those are the types of things that I am impressed by. I saw many people do extraordinary acts and show extraordinary courage. Like the bus boycott. It occurred before I was born—in '54, '55—and I was born in '56. My parents and my relatives told me about it and how the commitment was made and

- people walked. ... my mother was a domestic cleaner. I guess I reflect back and miss those simple dignified people. — *African American male, 50s, local (originally from Montgomery, Alabama)*
- ❖ [M]y father, he served in World War II. He was drafted and served in India, he didn't serve in the European campaign, but there were a lot of African Americans who did. ... they were subjected to so much prejudice and discrimination, but yet they were called to fight for their country, and they stepped up to the responsibility. You could have walked away from it, avoided it. But he stepped up to it. And a lot of them stepped up to it. They didn't like it, they knew things were wrong. He never forgot how he came back home after the war, and they'd been exposed to all these possible dangers in India and Burma, [and] then he was traveling somewhere upstate and stopped in South Carolina to get a sandwich, and they said, "You have to go around to the back because we don't serve blacks here." Those are the types of things that I think should be captured. I don't know if you can make them as significant as winning the Super Bowl or anything like that, but it is those types of things that have occurred in ordinary people's lives. — *African American male, 50s, local (originally from Montgomery, Alabama)*
 - ❖ It was paradox for me as a kid. In school, we had George Washington and Abraham Lincoln on the wall, and we all knew what they stood for: Washington helped establish the country, and Lincoln kept it together. As a kid, I had a very idealistic view of what our country was. Then the news would come on at night, there would be fire hoses and dogs. That was frightening for me as a child, thinking "Well, I thought we were all *together*, and we saved our unity as a country." And then I see people being treated like *animals*. Worse than we would treat an animal. I can remember in my little child's mind thinking that that was a very frightening thing. Why aren't these people treating everyone the way they would like to be treated themselves, regardless of skin color and history? It was hard for me to understand that people would have almost *hatred* in their hearts, or a desire to treat someone very badly simply because of the way they looked. — *White male, 50s, from Maine*
 - ❖ My father was born in Kaysville (?), Alabama. In that area there were some lynchings. He told me about two incidents that he could recall where black men were lynched. He was not there, [but] he was aware of it. And my father—at that time it was called "illegitimate," now it's called "single parents"—he had a hard time. His determination and his focus ... it's kind of like it didn't matter. To me, it's that American virtue—you've got to get up against it and get it done. No use sitting here crying about it. The world is what it is. I've got to figure out a way to make it. That was his whole attitude about everything. He had a lot of pain and anger, but he was able to channel it. So he went to war, [and] during the war he was truck driver. And when he came back, he made the decision to become a brick mason and did well at that. To give you more cultural context, there has always been disparity between how much whites and blacks get paid, just like women and men. So once he became skilled at masonry—the GI Bill was a good

deal for a lot of returning vets, minorities as well. He got married and started having kids. In Alabama, though, there was disparity between the wages, so he made a conscious decision to go up North where the pay scale was better and more equitable. He sent the money back home. Sort of the best of both worlds—making higher wages and sending money back home. We didn't have to worry about the money coming in, and my mother didn't have to worry about him gallivanting around—all he cared about was his family. That was the legacy he gave to the five of us; [we are] two brothers and two sisters, all married with kids. That was one of the strongest virtues of the African American community—commitment to the family. — *African American male, 51, local (originally from Montgomery, Alabama)*

The Centrality of Music and Other Arts

Many interviewees talked about the contributions of African Americans in the arts, particularly music. They saw these contributions as both national and international. Understanding the evolution of an art form—where it originated and how it evolved as it came into contact with other cultures—was of interest to many people, along with seeing or hearing that art form first-hand in the museum.

Music

Interviewees expressed three broad interests when it came to music: the history of African American music, including its role in African American society and its evolution over time; being able to hear music in the museum; and the interconnectedness of African American music and that of other cultures.

History of African American Music

- ❖ When you say music, I say drums—they are used to tell stories, they send messages, and stuff like that, for communication. The same thing as singing—gospel. My history tells me that gospel songs are actually messages; like spirituals say “steal away,” [and] that was a signal to leave on the Underground Railroad. — *African American male, 60s, local*
- ❖ Have a music theme throughout. It would be engaging and teach a lot about origins and that sort of thing. — *White male, 20s, local*
- ❖ Hip-hop as a political force. It is one of the most powerful movements. It is incorporated into so many aspects of our life in America and the world. It is a global movement. It is used as a tool everywhere from Palestine to here as a tool for social organizing, like resistance. It’s awesome. It includes so many art forms, and how much it’s been through and has still been able to survive. Once again, resilience. And so many great minds have come out of the hip-hop generation, so many good geniuses that people don’t even recognize. It is a social and political movement beyond music. That is important to note because today a lot of white Americans detach it from that. They see the commercialized, industrial version of hip-hop, and they detach it from its history, its roots, and the natural process of how it became so commercialized, which is really [about] corporate interest and the hijacking of the movement. It is important to make the distinction and tell the history of that. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*
- ❖ What I would like to see is the music that originated with black people; everything from the days of slavery and gospel music through Motown, which was a major explosion in the United States of music. For me, as a young child, to admire somebody like Barry Gordy and not just [groups like] the Supremes. ...

Barry Gordy did all that at Motown on an \$800 loan and quit his factory job at the auto factory, and he is someone who should be represented in a statue and a pamphlet with his story mentioned. He is [one of the greatest African Americans] in my lifetime, besides civil rights leaders, and more so than Oprah Winfrey. ... He really blended something from the African American culture [with] people of other heritages. From just being American, we have a lot of different heritages here. I think Barry Gordy has really had a big influence during *my* lifetime on American people. Music crosses all barriers, and he was just an idealist and made it work, and I hope to run into him someday and thank him. — *White male, 50s, from Rhode Island*

- ❖ I would like see the music and art and stuff that people did as a way to cope with the oppression that they were dealing with. — *White female, 18, local*
- ❖ I'd like to be able to go and listen to music. I'd like to know how the music was made ... the time surrounding the art and music, how the music reflected the time when it was made, because often you can't really figure it out. — *African American male, 60s, local*
- ❖ It would be really interesting to trace what was brought by African Americans from their home country: food, music, and traditions, that have evolved and changed over time and that are now part of our culture here. — *White female, 60s, local*
- ❖ I would start with the beginning of African American history from coming over and then to the present. Then I would focus on each cultural aspect like [NMAfA focuses] on art; focus on dance, music, the way we live. ... on every aspect that means being African American. ... When I say music, it's a big thing in America, and it has influences around the world if you think about it. Especially African American music started a lot of blues, and there were a lot of African art artists that inspired everything. Musical influences started from the basic drums ... Like a history of music. — *African American male, 20s, from North Carolina*
- ❖ African Americans from the fifties, before I was born, would have hits. And then maybe a white singer like Pat Boone would come along and make it a much bigger hit, with the black artist forgotten. That movie *Dream Girls* has a lot to do with the way music was transformed from black groups singing it to Caucasian groups singing it. — *White male, 50s, from Rhode Island*

Types of Music

- ❖ I'm very interested in African American music. I think jazz and the blues are already pretty well-studied, but there's a lot of early traditional African American music—gospel, mainly, but also traditional work songs and things of that kind—that are not widely heard and people are not widely familiar with, but that are

- very, very interesting. ... That's where I'm aware of a gap in people's knowledge. ... Some of the best rock and roll is played in churches, and people who are not a part of that scene never hear it. — *White male, age and residence unknown*
- ❖ Yeah, I like it [music]. I like the music, the hip-hop. Just hip-hop and some rock music. Lenny Kravits—but I don't think he is a real African American. ... Beyoncé ... Tupac, the hip-hop singles. — *Hispanic male, 30s, from El Salvador*
 - ❖ Oh gosh, the African American music is very important, and we're even starting to introduce it into our Presbyterian church. *Hallelujah*. — *White couple, 60s, from Georgia*
 - ❖ I like dancing. I observed black people dancing, and you could see their mobility, their sense of rhythm, how they listen to music, and how they make it visible in the way they dance. ... I've been in several occasions where you would have these two or three African American guys, and they would improvise and make music out of nothing. So they would have some paint buckets and carts from grocery stores, and they would make music. So this guy would play drums on all these improvised objects and make a rhythm out of it. And some black people were passing, and they started to dance to that! I mean, a white person will never be able to dance to that. It is just that they have it in their blood, and they were very good on that improvised music. It's almost like they cannot live without music and dance. — *White female, 30s, from Alexandria*
 - ❖ When it comes to lifestyle and music, [hip-hop] is a big thing in the US, and it seems that was on the rise in the last decade, and now it's even bigger and alive. — *African American male, 20s, from North Carolina*

Experiencing Music in the Museum

- ❖ If the museum gave people an opportunity to hear music they wouldn't hear elsewhere, I think that would be very valuable. — *White male, age and residence unknown*
- ❖ I wish [the museum] would make everybody enjoy and want to go there. Have some African music and dance. That would make young people interested. — *Asian female, 20s, from Georgia (originally from South Korea)*
- ❖ Harlem churches, tiny little churches in the south, where the music is unbelievable; I would like to hear some of that. I would like to have really good recordings—surround sound recordings of a real service with the real singing. — *White female, 60s, local*
- ❖ If I thought there was black choral music ... [or] there was some really good music, maybe in a room where you see pictures of a little church in the South or

- whatever and you are hearing ... I would go right for that; that would be huge. Anything that would include historical photographs. — *White female, 60s, local*
- ❖ [What would attract me to the museum is] music. ... I would love it if you could actually hear it while you are in there; like push a button, and you hear it. ... I don't know—the '30s, the '40s, the '50s, almost all of them. I mean, I like Motown. Anything. ... Music would take me in, and it's probably about all I would look at too. ... *Have a big section of music!* — *White female, 40s, from San Diego*
 - ❖ Of course the music ... the blues, jazz, some of the names that are not so prominent. It would be nice if you had a place for people to go experience ... some type of sound room. — *African American male, 50s, local (originally from Montgomery, Alabama)*
 - ❖ It could have booths there, listening booths, where you could listen to old tracks of African American music, because some records may not be available to buy. ... I could get this experience which I cannot get anywhere else right now. Such a museum can get hold of them. These booths may also have memorable words of African American people like Martin Luther King or others. — *White female, 30s, from Alexandria*

Music's Journeys

- ❖ Once again, hip-hop; there's a lot of communication between African hip-hop and Brazilian hip-hop and American hip-hop, and that is a form of connection in the diaspora. The fact that there are black people everywhere, and while the experience isn't the same, it is very similar for all those different communities; and those communities might tend to see [themselves] as isolated, but really there is a common thread. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*
- ❖ Blues, music from Cuba, Peru, from Mali, Sénégal, how music starts in Africa, comes here, goes back to Africa. It gets changed, it comes back again, and the way music goes back and forth and evolves and grows, and things are added to it in each place. And how musicians can often sit down and play with other cultures, how the language of music is universal. — *White female, 60s, local*

Other Art Forms

Art

- ❖ Art is a very important part of African American culture... Once again, I hate to put it in a box, but it is ... because when you think about it, it was a way to get

approval. Even in art it was difficult early on, because a lot of African American artists went to Europe because they couldn't get fair treatment here. But a lot went into art because it gave them an opportunity to perform. A lot of time people look at art differently than, for example, if I have to interact with you socially. So they could make a living as an artist easier; it was easier to be accepted. If you wanted a degree of respectability, you would go into that type of field. That was a fashionable type of track. Socially, though, African American artists were isolated from an integrated society. Josephine Baker, and others went to Europe because the racism here was too intense. I would like to see that brought out. Some stayed here and faced the racism because they couldn't bear leaving the country; I would like to see their story told, those that actually suffered here though they were encouraged to go to Europe. A lot of them didn't go because of fear, but a lot didn't go because they thought, "This is home. This is my country. Why should I have to go over to Europe to be accepted?" So they made inroads. They are as significant as the baseball players and athletes. ... Marion Anderson — *African American male, 50s, local (originally from Montgomery, Alabama)*

- ❖ Folk art is particularly interesting: people with no training who just sit down and put together a sculpture or painting. — *African American female, 50s, local*

Dance

- ❖ I would say dancing. They [the museum] could have events that would feature regular people, and not necessarily well-known artists, because as I said, there are people who are talented at the artist level, but they are living around the block, and they don't have an artistic profession. So you can have, like, this open space because it is less formal, but it needs to be a terrace. Like I saw in New York, these impromptu street performances. It could be encouraging for the black community because they have an opportunity just to perform there because it's fun, because there are so many talented people that do not ever get a chance to show off or to perform what they know to perform. So I think this is something that involves a regular guy that either lives in DC or visits the museum, and gives them a chance to have an interactive experience while at the museum. And it is also, like, being so informal, it is quite fun for everybody there, even those who do not necessarily perform but they are just watching. — *White female, 30s, from Alexandria*

Literature

- ❖ I would like an area that is dedicated to black writers such as James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and Maya Angelou. A mixture of writers who describe being African American and dig deep into the meaning of being black in America. — *White female, 60s, from Mississippi*

Fashion

- ❖ As a girl, I'd like to know the African American influence on fashion trends and that kind of thing. Because I think it's the same there as in music: they took the rich cultural background that came from Africa and put it into a European melting pot and made it different. There are certain things that are urban, trendy, hip-hoppy that wouldn't have existed without African Americans being part of the culture here. — *Asian-American female, 20s, local*

Arts in General

- ❖ Good understanding of hip-hop, a good understanding of black poetry and black music throughout history, in a real, objective way. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*
- ❖ To be able to see, hear, and experience the richness of the culture—music and textiles and paintings and gestures and language and food. All those things together. — *White female, 60s, local*
- ❖ I think I'm just always amazed by the craft, whether it's in clothing or utensils or that kind of thing. It's the ingenuity and making things from whatever the environment has to offer. It always fascinates me. — *White female, 50s, local*

Accomplishment and Atrocity

How does a museum presenting the African American story from the vantage point of the early 21st century strike the proper balance between accomplishment and atrocity? This was one of the most nettling issues for many interviewees. Most were acutely aware that, in addition to the inspirational tales that could be told about the achievements of individuals and the triumphs of the African American community as a whole, suffering and oppression also loom large.

Emphasizing Accomplishments

At one extreme were those who felt that the horrors of the past ought to be downplayed, in favor of celebrating the accomplishments of African Americans.

- ❖ Slavery cannot be played up. Slavery cannot be the focal point of the museum. There is much more to the African American story than slavery, and it is too bad so many people are hung up on that. The museum should be about achievements and overcoming diversity. This is what the National Museum of the American Indian is missing. It has very little to cling to, in terms of going from the past to the present, and it cannot really engage the visitors on a certain level. I hope this museum does not come up short. — *White female, 50s, from Virginia*
- ❖ Is [the Museum] going to dwell on the slavery, or on what [African Americans have] accomplished? ... I think [it should emphasize] accomplishments, because there are enough places that address slavery. ... There will something about slavery in there, I'm sure. But if they focused more on the accomplishments of African Americans, [it would be refreshing]. They have made great accomplishments. — *White female, 50s, from Indiana*
- ❖ Slavery is part of it; there's no denying that. But I think the interesting story for me, as a white woman—what do I know ...?—are the stories of hope and perseverance and success. I would not want to be defined by my worst, most apocalyptic experience. Personally, I would like to be defined by the experiences where I was able to go beyond that and carve out my own existence. ... So I wouldn't necessarily want to be defined by what happened to me as a victim. — *White female, 50s, Arkansas*
- ❖ I would like to see less of the slavery and the slave ships, and more of the amazing social history of African Americans since slavery. To me that's the most amazing thing—how far these people have come, despite the things that happened to them when they came here and the reasons they came here. We're on a fast track now. — *White female, 60s, local*
- ❖ I would hope, for the sake of where we are going in the country, that it would be a really positive, joyful kind of a thing. ... For instance, as a parent taking an

African American child into an exhibit, I think it would be so much more exciting for that child to see something really upbeat. They know enough about slavery and repression and segregation and so on. ... But do they really know what a huge explosion there has been in the last 20 or 30 years, with American black culture and economic striving and so on? — *White female, 60s, local*

Emphasizing Atrocities

At the other end of the spectrum, several interviewees stressed that they wanted a museum that pushed them to squarely confront the egregious injustices of the past. A common theme among people who wanted a stronger focus on slavery, racism, and historical injustice was a concern for the nation to avoid similar (if hopefully less glaring) transgressions of its own principles in the future. Such interviewees sometimes spontaneously mentioned the Holocaust Museum as a point of reference.

- ❖ I think it's important to make people uncomfortable, and to make people think about what has happened, so you recognize when it is happening all over again—here, and in places like Darfur and Somalia. So people *think*. I don't necessarily go to a museum to be made uncomfortable, but I do go to *think*. It's not like going to the movies to watch *The Sound of Music*. — *White female, 40s, from New York*
- ❖ I have a lot of friends who are African American, and they sometimes feel other people don't understand that [their people] were put through some really horrible things. ... I know there are things that people avoid discussing in history, because they don't want offend anyone. But it's all in the pursuit of knowledge, so you have to be aware of it. — *Asian-American female, 20s, local*
- ❖ [To see depictions of the harsh suppression of civil rights marchers in this museum] would certainly bring back tough feelings, that's for sure. But I think it's the same idea as the Holocaust Museum: you have to remember what happened—our history, and how we have tried to get beyond it. If you forget it, you may have to re-live it. ... We have to remind ourselves—even today, with the concerns we have about [balancing] national security and individual rights. You get reminded of what came before, and maybe you can learn—or we can all learn together—to react differently. Because there are going to be tough times again, I'm sure. — *White male, 50s, from Maine*
- ❖ Learn the real history so you don't make the same mistakes. I can't believe there would ever be slavery again, but you never know. It's [happening] in another way. In [my home country of] Greece, we have Albanian people that do all the nasty work, the dirty work. That's a kind of slavery. *White female, 65, from Greece*
- ❖ I would want [the new museum] to be as confrontational as possible. I'm probably more extreme than most Americans, though. And because it's the Smithsonian,

people [will be] coming from all over the country with different perspectives, so the reality is that it might have to be a little more mainstream. But I would like to feel uncomfortable and pushed, and made to think. Because it is important to have the lessons learned, instead of having those same failures over again. Let's just learn those lessons and keep them with us, so we don't repeat them. — *White female, 30s, local*

- ❖ It's important that people don't just see the bright side. You don't have to rub it in, and make people feel bad. But visitors should have an objective picture; they should see how miserably African Americans were treated. How *hard* slavery was—that blacks were just seen as *goods*, rather than human beings. Visitors should be confronted with pictures that might hurt, because those leave an impression. I mean, if people see a picture of slave being flogged or [learn] how families were separated, they really understand the injustice that was done. — *White male, 50s, from Germany*
- ❖ You have to be careful that you don't end up diluting the context. The context was a racial context; if you start diluting, it loses its sharp edge, and the contrast becomes kind of blurry. ... I want that stark contrast, and then I want to show that we are at this point now where we have this shared experience, and some folks realize they were wrong. That's pretty important; even George Wallace expressed regret. But at that time ... the contrast was black and white, and there's no way around it. Even [white] people with good hearts and good intentions were afraid to cross that boundary. That contrast has to be there, and it has to be stark. It has to scare people so they don't want to go back to that. That's why so many people showed up in [Jena,] Louisiana the other day—because they realized we don't want to go back. This is really ugly stuff; and when you see it, it really strikes a nerve. — *African American male, 50s, local (originally from Montgomery, Alabama)*
- ❖ There was that traveling exhibit, with the trees and the hangings and the postcards and the pictures—you know, people took pictures of lynchings of African Americans. I mean, that was very *real*. — *White male, 30s, local*
- ❖ Elaborate on how people were mistreated—specific individuals who looked at somebody the wrong way and were hung for that reason. ... When [you] look at European, Asian, or Latin descent, there's a much stronger anti-African hatred or mistreatment that these other cultures don't seem to get. That should be pointed out. It would be sad to see all that, but it needs to continuously told and told until it is overcome. — *White male, 50s, from Rhode Island*
- ❖ Maybe for the young people it would be very good to study the history. Perhaps they will grow up not doing the same mistakes. For example, in Germany. ... If the German young people would learn the real history, you wouldn't see young people now in Germany [who] are Nazis. Do you believe that? — *White female, 60s, from Greece*

- ❖ An absolute must is that some emphasis should be put on the fact that these people were brought to America against their will. They did not come as invaders; they did not cross the border illegally. They were brought here in chains, and they kept those chains around their ankles for 200 years. When [the nation] finally did the right thing and gave these people freedom, we still kept them at the periphery of life and did not let them really integrate into society. So these people have to fight every inch of the way, and everything that they got in term of rights was under high costs. It did not come as a favor from government or anybody else. — *White female, 60s, from Los Angeles*
- ❖ When you go to the low country of South Carolina, for example, you see the history of a plantation and that [slaves] were ... working out in hundred-degree heat, with snakes and insects and all that. ... And you take a look at some of the cabins they lived in. Ugh! — *White couple, 60s, from Georgia*

Some interviewees suggested that the younger generation of African Americans today were particularly in need of powerful reminders about the struggles and pain of their own people's past:

- ❖ *[Interviewee #1:]* A lot of us African Americans are forgetting about the struggle, and we need to be reminded. That struggle needs to be shown from beginning to end. You need to see that, because we're losing it from generation to generation. ... *[Interviewee #2:]* The [younger] generation—they don't have a clue! *[Interviewee #1:]* My friend's children were watching *Roots*, and they were seeing the slaves on the slave ship. And they were like, "How did they go to the bathroom?!" You know—so far removed. — *Two African-American females, 40s, from Georgia*
- ❖ In one of the classes that I took, I was the only Caucasian in the class. In the first class, one of the young men said, "I don't get it. What's the big deal? So what if they had separate drinking fountains?" And only the professor and I were shocked. I don't think very many young black children now understand much about the whole Civil Rights Movement, just as many young women today don't understand much about the whole women's movement. — *White female, 50s, from Ohio*

Another interviewee brought up an important point to bear in mind when presenting the uglier side of America's treatment of its black slaves and citizens: that regardless of their feelings about what "ought" to be shown, some people will recoil from graphic depictions of brutality and cruelty:

- ❖ I would say it should be "warts and all." But then, I'm also someone who has never been to the Holocaust Museum, because I've never been prepared for what I know I'll see there. But in the abstract, I think you have to show all the ugly parts—all the lynching photographs and that part of the history—because that is

part of the African American experience, unfortunately. If you want to *educate*, you have to show what has really happened. — *African American female, 50s, local*

Striking the Right Balance

Some interviewees suggested that a roughly even mix of “light” and “darkness” would not only be most appropriate, but also most accurate:

- ❖ I think it ought to be everything. Because that’s the whole picture, right...? ... When you get into the discussion of slavery, it has to be more like the Holocaust Museum—I don’t think you can get away from that. But then when you are talking about cultural achievements and music and politics, that’s more celebratory. — *White female, 20s, from San Francisco*
- ❖ [*Male Interviewee:*] We were just in Southeast Asia last year, in Cambodia. You go to the “killing fields,” which is basically the burial grounds where people were massacred. And then you go to Angkor Wat. That’s what they call “the good and evil of Cambodia.” So you see both sides. It’s a very intense experience on both ends, but you walk away with a real sense of what Cambodia was.
[*Female Interviewee:*] ...And what humans are. — *White couple, 30s, local*
- ❖ I think it needs to show both the accomplishments and the struggles. I wouldn’t want to see *just* the struggles. I don’t think it should be some kind of statement. I think it should show the history of slavery, but it should show what black Americans during that period accomplished as well—their joys and their church involvement and the parts of daily life that brought them pleasure—not just the suffering. ... I wouldn’t want it to be the “History of Slavery Museum.” — *White female, 30s, from Nebraska*
- ❖ I would like to see a wide variety of things represented—everything from the entertainment field, which I think everybody in the world can grasp on to, to the suffering. ... I would like to see things that represent their entire history in this country. Where they came from and how they came here, [and] that they were pretty much dragged here. I would like to see how they came to be African American. A lot of it was by force and cruelty and it would be sad to see, but it has to be said. ... I would like to see them fully represented for all their accomplishments also, what they have done, who they have been, who they have helped, and what changes they’ve made to society. It should tell the whole story: the dark side, the light side, the sad side and the truth. — *White male, 50, from Rhode Island*
- ❖ I would like to see a slave ship as an exhibit, but I would like an abstract representation that would transcend [the physical journey]. ... The torturous journey over here was a big deal, terrible. But I would like something to transcend

that. ... to show that there were difficulties, but show where things have flown. Be aware of the trial, but don't have the trial so morbid that you can't focus in on the triumph. But don't neglect it because sometimes people forget, and I don't want that to happen. — *African American male, 50s, local (originally from Montgomery, Alabama)*

- ❖ The museum has to deal with uncomfortable topics. ... There's a lot of people who don't know about what happened. [But] if you focus on exploitation and that sort of aspect, you're putting it up on a pedestal; so that has to be stressed, but not *only* that. — *White male, 20s, local*

- ❖ I can see it glorifying African Americans and talking about hemispheres meeting. I don't know. Maybe it has to have two parts. [One would be] the glorification of African Americans and their accomplishments in earlier and contemporary times. But how did this all come about...? How did they arrive on these shores and what happened...? We've got the Supreme Court across the street here; but the fact [is] that segregation and slavery were institutionalized. — *White female, 50s, from Ohio*

Look and Feel of the Museum

In addition to discussing the subject matter of the museum, many interviewees had thoughts about what they would like it to look and feel like, both in terms of the physical surroundings and the sorts of experiences they would hope to have.

Building and Physical Layout

The building itself and the impressions it conveys were mentioned frequently. Several interviewees stressed their hope that the building itself would be part of the appeal of a visit to NMAAHC:

- ❖ Try to make it something spectacular. Try to make it a controversial building, so people talk about it from the first moment on. Not just one of those museums that all look alike. ... So that's number one: Make the building something special. Something that is really outstanding, that people later will remember when they pass by. — *White male, 50s, from Germany*
- ❖ Sometimes you walk into an exhibit at the African Art Museum, and you're overwhelmed. I've never had that experience at an African American history museum. ... I think it's because places like the Sackler, the African Art Museum, and the National Gallery are spaces where everything is designed to make the visitor have a certain powerful experience when you enter. But with African American historical museums, eliciting that experience is not usually what the creators want to do. — *African American female, 50s, local*
- ❖ I'd prefer a building that has some significance. This building [the Donald W. Reynolds Center] is better than some of them, which look like they just popped them up and threw the pictures in. But this is a good example of a nice building. ... A building that is art in itself. I think that's a good lesson of the European museums; they are more artistic in their architecture, or they use a historic palace or an old church or something. — *White female, 30s, from Nebraska*
- ❖ I go to the Corcoran for the exhibitions, whereas for the National Museum of the American Indian, you can say you go for the building, too. Maybe that's because I am [an architect], but definitely other people go for the building, too. The building itself is an event. ... So the architecture, if it is appealing, I would notice it, and it will make a strong impression on me; even without knowing the content, I would have a strong impression. ... It will have to be something different than the government buildings in DC. [The American Indian Museum building] is such an out-of-the-ordinary shape and materials and everything; it is really something that you have never seen in DC. ... So it has to be a good architecture and in a way significantly different than anything else in DC. — *White female, 30s, from Alexandria*

- ❖ I like to walk into the big atriums like the Museum of Natural History. ... I like it to be open, to have glass, to have light coming in. Sometimes in a museum you like to create a certain mood, like the Holocaust Museum—[but] I don't want that kind of mood! ... I want life coming in—celebration, to show the triumph of a movement, people, individuals, the country, Americans. I want to see glass letting in light, maybe at different angles, hitting prisms and scattering colors ... a rainbow of our diverse society. Maybe a display outside that would be of significance; something simplistic but strong, and maybe reflecting faith and rebirth. — *African American male, 50s, local (originally from Montgomery, Alabama)*
- ❖ The look of the museum is really important. The National Museum of the American Indian looks like a mountain and shows the love of land and nature. Maybe have African [influences in the] architecture, along with US. — *African American male, 17, local*

Several interviewees discussed how unimpressive physical surroundings could undermine the finest of collections. “Clutter”—both in terms of object presentation and wall text—was often mentioned in this context as something to be avoided. Noise, crowds, and lack of sunlight were also pet peeves.

- ❖ If you have special things to show, give them enough room. For example, I've been to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. It's cramped; it's way too much. You are *lost*, because there is so much. For me, that's an example where you have wonderful art and wonderful historical stuff, but it's cramped. — *White male, 50s, from Germany*
- ❖ If you have exhibitions that are way too long, you can have a break—like a garden, or a place where you see the sunlight again. In many museums, you just go through room by room, and they are all without windows because they are all exhibition spaces. That's a little bit too much; you feel like you want it to end. The exhibitions might be very good, but maybe you need a break. [...] I think this [dynamism] is what makes a museum interesting. — *White female, 30s, from Alexandria*
- ❖ I'd like to see an outdoor area with sculpture, so you can enjoy artwork as well as the weather. And nothing too cluttered or pieced together. Some museums have too many exhibits and too many things, and it's hard to know what to look at. Hopefully it will be nice and spaced out. — *Asian-American female, 20s, from Texas*
- ❖ I love kids, but I hate being in a museum with four or five busloads of them. Having space to see the exhibits is key; it makes it less rushed and hectic. — *African American female, 50s, local*

Several interviewees discussed the importance of “flow” in the museum experience, particularly in larger museums that can easily become overwhelming in the absence of a presentation that is logical and digestible.

- ❖ I think a museum has to have sections that are small enough that you can finish in an hour or two, so you don’t feel overwhelmed. [For example,] the Met is big. If you try to do the whole museum, it would freak you out. So the exhibitions they put together are small enough that you can do them in an hour, and feel you have really seen and learned something. — *White female, 40s, from New York*
- ❖ [At the Holocaust Museum in Israel] you can digest it; it is broken down, and the way it flows, you have to go through certain sections to get to the next. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*
- ❖ Make it easy to walk through. In some museums, you go in one part and then say, “Where do I go next...?” Make it sequential. In the International Spy Museum, it was easy to know where to go next. The way it was structured, you just know where to go. — *Asian-American female, teen, from Georgia*
- ❖ The [museum] in Charleston was well done for us, because it was done in such a sequence that we could follow along with it. And it was done pictorially, because they had a lot of the pictures of the slaves when they came into Charleston. And then some of the history is oral history; they recorded from where the people had come from, and that was interesting to us. — *White couple, 60s, from Georgia*

Conceptual Coherence

Related to the issue of a clear physical layout was the issue of presenting material in a conceptually coherent way. Several interviewees stressed that it would be easy, given the scope of the museum’s topic, to create a museum that confuses or overwhelms people. These interviewees discussed the importance of a museum that holds together as a whole in a coherent way.

- ❖ One problem you guys will have is to make sure you don’t have a hodge-podge of a zillion different things that just confuses people. ... When people come out of the museum, they should have some sense of what they’ve seen, as opposed to thinking, “What was that all about? What did it all mean?” — *African American female, 50s, local*
- ❖ I had to go through the National Museum of the American Indian several times. The first time, I was extremely disappointed. I thought, “Okay; what are they telling me...? What am I supposed to learn here?” When I went the second and third times, I got more out of it. But don’t forget, the average museum visitor here is a tourist who just rushes through—who goes there once in his lifetime maybe,

and that's it. He's lost at the American Indian Museum. — *White male, 50s, from Germany*

Some interviewees suggested the way to do this would be to arrange the core of the museum according to chronological history.

- ❖ If I were setting up the concept, I would go decade by decade, and lead the visitor through history. ... What I didn't like in the American History Museum was that there was no [guiding] thread. It's a little here, a little there. ... I expect to be *taught* about the history. I do not expect to have a little spot here, a little spot there. I expect to come out of the museum and be able to say, "Okay, this is what really happened to them." — *White male, 50s, from Germany*
- ❖ I would start with the beginning of African American history—from coming over [from Africa to] the present. Then I would focus on each cultural aspect: art, dance, music, the way we live. On every aspect, that means being African American. — *African American male, 20s, from North Carolina*
- ❖ I would want to see a chronological history certainly, and how it varies throughout different parts of the country. — *White female, 50s, local*
- ❖ My first reaction is to go to the history of stuff, but you also [should] have art and jazz and hip-hop. There are various aspects of it, but if you ask me about gut reactions, I would go to history. ... There are various ways to do that; I would do it probably chronologically. ... I like chronological as opposed to topical [presentation]. I would do the whole museum chronologically. It would be overlapping chronologies, but it would be a chronological museum. — *White male, 30s, from Alexandria*
- ❖ [I would expect to see] just the chronological order of what they went through—basically inventions and prominent people and that kind of stuff. — *White female, 40s, from San Diego*
- ❖ A museum where you can study the history of how the African people as slaves came to the United States and how they have adjusted. ... First they were slaves, but then they were free and able to go to schools and to university. Perhaps they will be presidents. I don't know, perhaps one day. It's a big development to go from slavery to a black African American president. — *White female, 60s, from Greece*

Of course, this is not to say that there was anything like a consensus among interviewees that chronological history was the most desirable way to structure material within the museum. Other interviewees offered different ideas about how to make the material conceptually manageable.

- ❖ I think it would be interesting to walk through the museum and have questions posed to you—to think through things as you go through. Have questions that challenge people and maybe push them outside of their comfort level. Maybe there’s not a single answer, but there’s information throughout the gallery that would lend itself to answering that question, and maybe make people come to some different conclusions about how they think about things. — *White male, 30s, local*
- ❖ [The museum] could leave questions in people’s minds; it doesn’t have to reach conclusions, I think. Then when people leave, if they go away thinking it’s something they have to look at more, you’ve done something with a museum that’s really [valuable]. — *White male, 50s, local*
- ❖ I believe that almost every museum should have a subliminal message. An art exhibition is not there only to present itself. I’m not talking about militant art—art in general has a message. ... It could be a message of love, it could be a message of beauty, it could be a political message, but there is always a message. Since art in general has a message, a museum that presents art should have a message. — *White female, 60s, from Los Angeles*
- ❖ [I like] for a museum to tell a story, and also to explain either culturally or from some other angle how that is relevant today. ... It would just be interesting to explore the culture today, what it is, and why it is [like that] for historical reasons. — *White female, 30s, from San Diego*
- ❖ The visitor should come out with an idea of how the whole thing developed. Of course, you should also have a room for African American music, a room for African American sports. ... So do it [both] by the history, and by subject: sports, entertainment, politics. Two threads: one by subject, and one a linear history. — *White male, 50s, from Germany*

And some interviewees explicitly spoke against a chronological presentation—occasionally making their aversion to such an approach explicit.

- ❖ It seems like it will turn out to be more of a history museum—like the National Museum of American History—except for black people. I would like it to be more cultural than that, with cool exhibits with art and music. ... Something more along the lines of the Hirshhorn in some parts ... like galleries or floors dedicated to art of certain periods. A sort of gallery-going experience. — *African American male, 60s, local*
- ❖ I just don’t feel the appeal [of history museums]. ... History is kind of like trivia: “What happen there in this country at that time.” [But] I would be interested in the history of ideas—why such an idea was fashionable at a certain time. ... I’m more interested in ideas—where they developed, and why—than in events and

leaders; and I don't think you'll see that in a history museum. — *White female, 20s, from Chicago*

Appealing Features

Interviewees also discussed features that particularly appealed to them on visits to other museums. One message came across loud and clear—for both children and adults, *interactivity*, broadly defined, was immensely appealing, such as audio and visual exhibits, immersive experiences, live artists and artisans, computerized displays that respond to visitor input, and so on.

Younger Audiences

- ❖ [My favorite museum experience was when] I went to a science museum that was *really* interactive—things like scientists giving demos with liquid nitrogen. ... I was a kid, so liked that a lot. [The African American museum] should have something more than “Walk through and read.” — *Asian-American female, 20s, from California*
- ❖ [My young boys] like to interact with what they see [in a museum]. I don't think reading is very attractive to them. I think they might be interested in the way [African American slaves lived], so they could imagine what it would be like if they had been born in Africa and had come to America on a slave ship. — *White female, 30s, from Holland*
- ❖ [*Child 1:*] I like hands-on...[Like] their toys...[*Child 2:*] Maybe learn some of the songs they sang in the fields...[*Child 3:*] ...Maybe draw some pictures... — *Three white female elementary school children, from California*
- ❖ I like to walk through and read, but I know young people like interactivity. There's nothing [interactive] down here in Washington! It would be nice to see something that would engage children, too. — *Mixed race (black-white) female, 60s, residence unknown*
- ❖ I'd like to see specialized programs for kids; maybe even specialized sections for kids. Where they could go in and there would be computer things they could do on their own, maybe while their parents were taking a tour of the museum. I don't know that kids are so interested in touring the museum as in doing things more interactively—listening to things. ... At their learning level. ... [For example,] I think the National Portrait Gallery is maybe not so cool for kids. — *White female, 40s, from New York*
- ❖ I think the big problem is how to get young people to *go*. That's a perennial problem with museums; young people are not terribly interested in history,

unfortunately. [What has worked for us³ is] hands-on stuff. ... Anything that makes noise. — *White male, 50s, local*

Adult Audiences

- ❖ I would like to see a lot of spoken stuff—people being able to tell their own stories. A lot of oral history. Stuff that people could listen to integrated into the exhibits. Museums don't do enough of that. The Holocaust Museum does it, but I haven't seen it in a lot of other places, except when you do an audio tour. But I think museums could be more interactive in that way, to keep people more engaged. And I think oral history is particularly important in African American history. — *White female, 40s, from New York*
- ❖ If it's all photographs and stuff, it's hard to keep your interest after an hour. In the Air and Space Museum, you can go all around the planes and check them out from all the angles. If [NMAAHC] was more interactive—like a plantation home that if you walk through, see what life was like—that would be interesting. — *White male, 30s, from Alexandria*
- ❖ [I really] liked the redo of the vault of the National Archives—there are so many historical documents, and throughout the exhibit there are drawers you can pull out. And the question boards on a couple of walls that ask, “What is this?” And there is a sketch of it, and you guess and then press a button, and the board slides up and it tells you what it is. And the binoculars that you look through. I'm kind of like a kid with those things. — *African American male, 17, local*
- ❖ A museum does not have to be as a burden or as a school duty—it should be also *fun*. You have to think how to make it fun. To make it fun is also to keep the attention of people. You have to think that you will have children, and you will have people that don't like to read too much. — *White female, 30s, from Alexandria*
- ❖ As a kid, I remember we would come down here to the American History Museum, and they had the ice cream parlor downstairs. Going into it today, it doesn't have the same feel. Back then, you'd walk in, and you felt like you were really in this authentic old ice cream parlor. And you were eating ice cream, so you were *there*. ... Kind of like the holodeck on *Star Trek*, where you are totally submerged. — *White male, 20s, local*
- ❖ The Civil Rights Museum in Memphis is mind bending. It is done astonishingly well and imparts a deeper understanding of causes and effects of civil rights and struggles for equality. History makes sense after spending time at that museum. It is overwhelming and very moving. The social and political effects of racism are

³ The interviewee was the director of a small independent museum in Maryland; this was not known at the time he was approached by OP&A staff for an interview in the National Portrait Gallery.

felt—not merely passed on in the form of information or words hung on walls. —
White female, 60s, from Mississippi

- ❖ *[Female Interviewee:]* I really liked when we went to the Folklife Festival on the Mall, and there was an exhibit that was on African cultures—their jewelry and sculptures, and that sort of thing. ... You could actually touch the stuff; in a lot of museums, you're not allowed to touch the artifacts. And you could even see the artisans there, putting stuff together; that was really neat. *[Male Interviewee:]* It was almost like you were at Colonial Williamsburg, which is “living history” so to speak. — *White male and Asian-American female couple, 20s, local*
- ❖ An exhibit at NMNH and also the Folklife Festival in 1986 was very memorable. They had people who were part of the exhibit; craftspeople, artists who were creating things, actors, musicians, etc. You could certainly do that at NMAAHC. — *White female, 60s, local*
- ❖ I just remember that [this exhibition on the Harlem Renaissance] integrated a lot of visual elements, but it was also very sensitive. I learned things. And it was entertaining in a way that was aesthetically pleasing. It seemed like it was interdisciplinary; you'd learn socially what was going on, but also culturally. ... It drew me in that way. I remember it being very colorful and sort of like tall—in sense that you could read things in high places. But I think the interdisciplinary cultural, social aspects were what appealed to me. — *White male, 20s, local*
- ❖ I would make it with a lot of gadgetry and flashy and things that you have interactions with. I would have a cool gift shop with lots of little toys—fun toys that you can play with and use and break and be overcharged for. Kind of like the frozen ice creams they sell at the Air and Space. I know I get ripped off when I buy them, but that's half the fun of going to the museum. — *White female, 20s, from New York*
- ❖ The [museum] that had the greatest effect on me ... is a very small museum in Amsterdam. It was where the Diary of Anne Frank was written. I walked [through] it, and it sends a shiver down my spine now. The way it was laid out, and the way you went through. As you walked up a three- or four-story building, they had a presentation in each area: artifacts, and pages from the diary, and things like that. By the time I got to the top, I had an amazing feeling of how terrible it must have been. It sticks in my mind. — *White male, 40, from Australia*
- ❖ I would like to see more interactive stuff—like videos, or something. But interesting videos, not just boring documentaries. Cool movies about stuff [like] music or art. — *African American male, 60s, local*
- ❖ The Holocaust Museum was great, because of the interactive elements. They had Holocaust survivors talk about their experiences. They have audio and audio-visual displays, and a lot of hands-on things. They showed a lot of primary

- sources—documents, photographs, diaries. The primary sources made it good; you should also have that in the new museum. — *White male, 20s, from California*
- ❖ Museums that I like have interactive displays. It's not just "Keep your hands by yourself and walk through." ... [This museum] should have different areas focused for different age groups. — *Asian-American female, 20s, from California*
 - ❖ My favorite museum on the Mall is the National Air and Space Museum, because to me, it's the most interactive. I have a short attention span. I can only focus on things quickly; I observe and I move on. I don't spend a lot of time staring or mulling over the exhibits. — *White female, 20s, from New York*
 - ❖ Instead of showing 10 pictures and a manuscript, maybe you show a video that shows both the manuscript and the pictures and some other narrative with it. — *White female, 30s, from Alexandria*
 - ❖ [We would want] a lot of take-away literature about the museum and what is in it. ... [And] a grand opening like they had at the National Museum of the American Indian. — *African American couple, 30s, local*

The Museum as a Social Space

Some interviewees also mentioned the importance of considering the museum as a social space, in addition to a place for education and reflection.

- ❖ At a place like the National Gallery, sometimes it's not that I'm tempted by a specific exhibit. I'll just go there to meet friends. We'll just go to that big cafeteria. It's just a fun place to hang out. And then we'll wander around for a bit. ... The Sackler is also a place where I just feel very comfortable. In the back there are these gardens—it's beautiful. So I like to just hang out there for half of a Sunday. — *Asian-American female, 40s, local*
- ❖ It would also be really neat to have some kind of jazz or Southern music café that had food and programs—like a Friday or Saturday night jazz series, where you could go and drink coffee and listen to music. Almost like Blues Alley in Georgetown, but here, downtown. — *White male, 20s, local*
- ❖ You can have like an open space for dancing. ... Almost like a club. And it could be a gathering point for both African American people and for people who like this music and this atmosphere. So it could be a connection, like a club. ... You cannot make half of the museum about music, but if you make a feature like that, it will also say a lot, and it will define music as an important element of their culture. — *White female, 30s, from Alexandria*

Embracing Complexity, Avoiding Clichés

Some interviewees discussed the tension between, on the one hand, a subject matter full of complexities, subtleties, and sensitivities, and on the other hand, the forces that will push NMAAHC to present history in a distorted, oversimplified, or selective way. For example, the imperatives to avoid controversy, honor iconic figures, and preserve cherished myths could result in a scrubbed, “politically correct” museum that fails to challenge visitors or to break new ground. Many interviewees made no secret of their view that it would be a great mistake for the museum to play it safe.

Showing Unexpected Things

Interviewees noted that many people have already been exposed to certain aspect of African American history—in some cases, in great depth—through textbooks, documentaries, other museums, and other sources. For this reason, interviewees often discussed the need to explore subjects and perspectives that were new, surprising, fresh, challenging, or unusual.

- ❖ Not just paintings and photographs of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. I’d like to see things that I *don’t* know. . . . I think it would be nice to expose the good things that happened in bad historical times, as well as bad things that are happening right now. Things we haven’t see before — *White male, 20s, local*
- ❖ Like most people, I only know the surface-level history—such as Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement. I’m interested in exhibits that would educate me beyond what is taught in school. . . . Maybe other leaders who are not so well known, such as African American woman leaders and their role in history. And artifacts from everyday, every time period—to see how of life has changed along with the times. — *Asian-American female, 20s, from California*
- ❖ Besides the standard themes that you see in the curriculum, I would like to see a focus on music and forms of art that aren’t standard for American culture. Not painting or sculpture, but things that are native to African American culture that are less mainstream: forms of weaving or things like that, food-related things. I don’t think enough museums do those kinds of exhibitions that are culturally related to food. I’m Italian, so I always think about food. — *White female, 40s, from New York*
- ❖ I think students in school learn the basics, like what Martin Luther King did. [I would like to see the museum] portraying those people as ordinary people, and exploring the hurdles they had to overcome—to remind people that it is ordinary people who become these heroes. So people feel empowered to make changes and take action. — *White female, 30s, local*

- ❖ When you take a look at the mansion where [Robert E.] Lee lived in Arlington, ... it showed how the slaves were treated by two different families and how the house slaves were treated differently and actually had land that was given to them. It was very interesting to hear some of the history of these Africans, and to find out that Lee was not as good a master as the preceding master. — *White couple, 60s, from Georgia*
- ❖ The history and presence of black radical activism and resistance [ought] not to be minimized, because that's what I find in a lot of mainstream American discourse. Or it is dismissed completely. — *White (Jewish) male, 18, local*
- ❖ Maybe a whole section on African American movements throughout the years and black radicalism. That would be cool. The Civil Rights Movement and the Black Panthers, and groups that were active in the Vietnam War and groups that are active now and some that span all the years. That would be cool to see the history of radicalism in African American history. — *African American male, 60s, local*
- ❖ In Brooklyn, there is an art museum. It's not very well known; I can't even remember the name. A friend took me there. There was quite a collection of African American art, although it was not exactly an African American museum. ... At the time—this was more than 10 years ago—I was most surprised by the photography exhibit, which is what my friend took me to see. It portrayed African Americans from the mid-to-late 1800s who were very well dressed and quite well educated. I suppose I thought of [all] African Americans of that period as slaves—not very well-to-do or well educated at all. I suppose I had not thought so much about the African Americans who were *not* slaves, who were in the Northern cities. — *Asian-American female, 40s, local*
- ❖ *[Interviewee #1:]* What you need to put in there is something on John Brown. We were down at Harper's Ferry yesterday, and it was amazing—a lot of history in there. We live in Atlanta, but I had never even heard of John Brown.
[Interviewee #2:] From one perspective, you could look at him as a terrorist. He caused trouble, but it was all for a good cause. If someone were to come in and do something like that now, they would call him a terrorist—for trying to change things to better the status of some Americans. — *African-American female, 40s, from Georgia*
- ❖ In Denver, Colorado, there was big migration of black cowboys. A lot of people don't know about that. [These untold stories] are a must. — *Two African-American females, 40s, from Georgia*
- ❖ When they open this museum, they should have something from all the little independent African museums throughout the country. This should be a repository of things from all over the United States and other museums. A centralized thing. The one [museum] in New York City was so one-sided. Cover

- the entire United States, and have something for everybody, from no matter where they come from. — *African American male, 60s, local*
- ❖ I'm excited when I see connections to my home [state of Maine]. We were fortunate to have the first African American admitted to the bar in the United States—in Portland, Maine in 1844: Macon Allen. And that's an interest of mine, a connection that I have. ... When I was a child, my mother was a marcher for Civil Rights. There weren't too many people marching in Maine, but we did have a couple of events. So there's a connection there. ... [I'd also like to see something in the new museum about] the traditionally black colleges—what their roles were initially, how they have flourished, and what they are today. There's another Maine connection: Oliver Otis Howard—the civil war general after whom Howard University is named—was from Maine! — *White male, 50s, from Maine*
 - ❖ Every museum that deals with African American culture has a big slavery section, and that's good. But [NMAAHC's slavery section] should pop out at you. At other museums it's always the same boring information. You kind of just walk really fast through that section. It's boring because there is too much text—huge paragraphs. — *African American male, 17, local*
 - ❖ If I were the director of this museum, I would definitely think in terms of making this museum less ordinary—less boring than just presenting “This is what happened, then 20 years later, this is what happened.” ... Sometimes history museums tend to be boring. ... I think this museum should offer something to challenge your mind and to make it more interesting. ... This is what I would like to see: something that is not boring—something that tells more than just the historic facts. — *White female, 30s, from Alexandria*
 - ❖ Any black that was a slave would have been very happy to be [Washington's or Jefferson's] slaves, because they were treated with respect. Jefferson trained all his slaves to read and write, and they went to school with his kids. He knew that they had to learn because they couldn't be put out on their own without knowing [a trade] and knowing how to read and write. Washington did the same thing. Half of his slaves had professions—they were bricklayers and masos and carpenters, and they made nails for a living and whiskey. When he died, 316 slaves got freed because he wrote it into his will. But they were all trained to do something. — *White male, 60s, from Wisconsin*
 - ❖ That would be a challenge for any curator: to not oversimplify what was going on. For example, people think that Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves. That's a common perception, but it's wrong. What he did was free slaves in the rebellious states. And as I understand it, he did it primarily to create a fifth column in the South, and to prevent Europe from endorsing the Southern cause, which they were thinking about doing. But they couldn't endorse slavery. ... So it was a strategic thing; it wasn't really “freeing the slaves.” But that's the popular perception. ... A good way of putting it [would be] setting the record straight

about these things. Not oversimplifying history. ... I think you want to present [people like Lincoln and King] as real people, rather than heroes—with their good points and their foibles. By making them into heroes, you suggest that the times and events were less important than the people involved, and that's not always the case. — *White male, 50s, local*

- ❖ I do have one concern. There are some things that are sometimes presented as facts or history that are really a recent embellishment. I think more and more things like that are slipping into so-called history. One of them is this whole idea of “colorful quilts” that were used to point out the way. I'm pretty sure that is just a nice story that doesn't have a lot of historical accuracy. I guess I would just be very careful about what is or what is not presented, because it is going to be a controversial thing in many ways. It's a tough subject. — *White female, 50s, from Ohio*

Some interviewees emphasized the need to avoid belaboring the basics of topics such as slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, with which many visitors are likely to be well-acquainted.

- ❖ Is it all right not to show [much on the Civil Rights Movement], since that's being shown someplace else...? The museum I visited in Atlanta did a beautiful job with the whole Martin Luther King story. — *African American female, 50s, local*
- ❖ I feel that the tragedies of slavery are so played out; we learn about that so much in the fifth grade. As an anthropologist, it would be interesting to see some of the tragedies happening *now*. ... Some people don't think about the huge disparities that still happen right now. — *White male, 20s, local*
- ❖ There's a lot of museums already focusing on civil rights and things like that. I don't know that you need another one. — *White female, 50s, from Indiana*
- ❖ I believe the topic of slavery is hammered and exploited. It need not be dwelled upon. We need to acknowledge and accept that it existed, but we need to move on. Throughout history, genocide has existed and continues to exist: the Holocaust, Darfur, the Inquisition. The critical aspect is acquiring knowledge and wisdom to prevent unfair treatment and brutality. — *White female, 50s, local (originally from Eastern Europe)*
- ❖ [I don't know if emphasizing] the racial aspect would be very good. Sometimes it plays negatively—it just hypes up the discrimination factor. That is something that your curator will probably focus on, to make sure that it is not getting into racism and that sort of thing. I find that pretty negative. — *White female, 50s, from Indiana*

Avoiding Political Correctness and Editorializing

Several interviewees had concerns that the museum could end up either a bland one that studiously avoids controversy, or an extended morality play. These interviewees indicated they would prefer a museum that is hard-hitting but clear-eyed—something that neither shrinks from challenging subjects nor imposes interpretations that may suit some public constituency or another.

- ❖ [We went to a museum] in Savannah [that] was really great. ... It didn't pull any punches. It was very, very historically accurate, which a lot of [other museums] are not. A lot of them try to "justify." — *White couple, 60s, from Georgia*
- ❖ [The National Museum of American History exhibition that covered civil rights] conveyed the struggle and the human element, and gave you a feel for what things were like before, during, and after. ... And what was really interesting about the "after" piece was that it wasn't, "Everything's great now!" We still have these issues. Some people are still concerned that schools are segregated, because population patterns of schools are mostly neighborhood-based. A lot of different factors play into that, but the end result is still segregation. So I thought that it was really nice that it brought it up in the context of current events, and [did not portray racial problems] as something in the past—and [imply that] now America's great and we don't have any race issues anymore. It is important to not just portray this as "Case closed. Let's pat ourselves on the back." — *White female, 30s, local*
- ❖ Make sure it's not politically correct. ... It's a government-subsidized thing, so it's going to be subject to politics—I have no doubt about that. ... [But a politically correct museum] wouldn't break out into new areas. I would like to see a museum where people come out debating with each other, intelligently. — *White male, 50s, local*
- ❖ I found the National Museum of the American Indian very politically correct. ... I'd like [history] to be shown just as it was, not as a political statement. — *White female, 30s, from Holland*
- ❖ I know there is some *intraracial* hatred. Like for example, African Americans [descended from slaves] hate the Africans who just got here. So I would like to maybe understand why. ... [But] I guess you cannot mention that, because you have to be politically correct. ... It raises sensitive issues, [and] I don't know who can bring it up. — *White female, 20s, from Chicago*
- ❖ It's going to offend some people, because our whole history is "offensive." — *African-American female, 40s, from Georgia*
- ❖ I don't like a museum if you get only one perspective. This is exactly what was missing [at the National Museum of the American Indian]: I didn't see enough of

the perspective of the intruders, the white people who came in. — *White male, 50s, from Germany*

- ❖ I would not think the museum should be a motor or a platform for any sort of indoctrination. It should be a report of what happened. Let the people make their own decisions. Present the facts and the history, and let people make their own decision without any agendas. ... If you're doing an exhibit on Muhammad Ali, talk about his fights and record, but without injecting the curators' or the developers' own biases or trying to get any socio-political point across. Just give the facts of what happened, and let it speak for itself. — *White female, 20s, from New York*

- ❖ Leave all of the feelings and interpretations and all that out of it, and just make it historically correct. And then, people can read what they're feeling. ... I took a course at a community college. [The professor] was a white guy, and I never heard a guy teach black history [like he did]. He gave us copies of letters written by slave owners and letters written by slaves, and we read them for ourselves. I mean, they were unbelievable. You left there with your own feelings. When he teaches, he does not teach like he's trying to liberate the races, or trying to educate African Americans. He's just saying, "This is what happened, and these are the facts." —*African American male, 50s*

Thoughts on Further Studies

During the course of conducting and compiling these interviews, several members of the OP&A staff came up with ideas for further, more targeted formative research to assist the planners, curators, and other creators of NMAAHC.

- ❖ *A study of other African American museums, to explore lessons already learned by organizations that have experimented with approaches that may be under consideration at NMAAHC.* This would involve interviews with key personnel at these organizations, and, if possible, training their staff to conduct a simple survey that would provide information on what visitors particularly like (or dislike) at these museums. Institutions could include the Anacostia Museum, African American Museum in Philadelphia, National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Detroit Museum of African American History, National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Dayton, and National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis.
- ❖ *A targeted study of differing perceptions held by African Americans and others on selected aspects of NMAAHC's subject matter.* This would involve text- and image-sorting exercises with Smithsonian visitors and people off the Mall, the results of which would be analyzed using a “concept mapping” approach to identify distinctive threads in people’s attitudes and perceptions. (This approach recently yielded very useful results for the project team for the National Museum of the American Indian’s future exhibition on treaties; see the OP&A report, *Mapping Treaties: Concept Mapping as a Guide for Developing a New Exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian*, August 2007. Available online at <http://www.si.edu/opanda/docs/Rpts2007/Treaties%20Report%20Final.pdf>.)
- ❖ *An in-depth qualitative analysis of the most illuminating interviews conducted for this report—that is, those in which the interviewee went beyond “safe” or “conventional” opinions and expressed personal views that are less readily shared with strangers.* These interviews could be carefully and intensively analyzed to see if they suggest new understandings of the ways people construct meaning around particular topics. Analysis of this kind is somewhat like prospecting for gold—difficult and risky, but with potentially high rewards. At a minimum, however, it would suggest new areas for investigation in subsequent interviews.
- ❖ *Further in-depth qualitative interviewing, such as the following:*
 - Interviews on selected topics with different age and ethnic groups;
 - Interviews about what non-exhibition programming (musical and dramatic performances, lectures, storytelling, etc.) people would find most appealing;

- Interviews with “off-Mall” audiences who may not be regular museum goers.
- ❖ Space-related studies, based on what visitors who come for different purposes might expect and want:
- *Audience projections*: use Census, school population, tourism, and other data describing local and national visitation to develop a range of projections for museum attendance. (OP&A staff was involved in developing similar projections for NASM, NMAI, and the NMNH food court.)
 - *Performances*: interview people to assess how important live performances are and what types of performances they would be interested in (e.g., concerts, arts and crafts demonstrations, and story-telling), and, based on data from the Smithsonian, local cultural events, and other museums, project audience size and space requirements.
 - *Exhibition spaces*: assess visitor interest in, for example, temporary vs. permanent exhibitions, desirable size of galleries in terms of physical and intellectual comfort (e.g., “nooks” that address very specific topics such as art, food, and dance), a music room with listening booths or small auditoriums, and spaces for audiovisual presentations such as movies, videos, and slide/photograph shows.
 - *Food-related spaces and amenities*: assess what people have in mind when they refer to food as part of African American culture; for example, eateries, cooking demonstrations, cooking classes, cooking competitions.
 - *Social areas*: assess what visitors might want in the way of social areas, such as a café, lounges, and seating.
 - *Audiovisuals and interactive devices*: assessment of audiovisual and interactive options at various museums, their costs and benefits, and audience reactions.
 - *Research spaces*: assess to what extent NMAAHC will be seen as a location for conducting research on African American history and culture, and what the implications are (e.g., space for non-staff researchers and a library).
 - *Collections*: in addition to permanent collections, assess need for educational collections that can be used by visitors, and the associated space implications.

- *Review and observation of visitor space and use at other museums:* assess what types of spaces other museums offer (exhibition, school activities, family activity rooms, cloak rooms), and how visitors respond to and use them.

- ❖ *A study to develop a more systematic body of data on African American museum goers and non-museum goers.* The data on African American museum goers at the Smithsonian and, it appears, at other museums is fragmented and incomplete. One reason, at least at Smithsonian museums, is that the percentage of African American visitors is usually low (in the range of 5-9 percent). There is very little information on African Americans who do not go to museums; the literature has only a handful of studies. Pulling together what information is available from various sources, and conducting some new studies targeted specifically at African Americans so that a larger data set is available, would be highly useful. This project would involve at least:
 - *Mining the data that OP&A has collected through surveys and qualitative interviews at Smithsonian museums over the last 10 years and, to the extent available, drawing on data from other museums.* OP&A has a large amount of data from studies conducted at NMAfA. It appears that the responses of African Americans are often different from those of other visitors with respect to interests, experiences in the museum, and possible enhancements that would improve their visits. For example, African American visitors to NMAfA express a strong interest in African culture, which also emerged as a significant interest in the random interviews OP&A just completed. While OP&A does not expect to be able to draw definitive conclusions from the results of the data mining given the differences in the studies, it might be possible to generate hypotheses about African American visitors in comparison with other visitors that could then be tested through new studies.

 - *Conducting targeted surveys of African American museum goers and non-museum goers.* Such studies can be used to fill in the gaps and increase the population size for which data are available. Museum goers might include visitors both to Smithsonian and to non-Smithsonian museums outside of Washington, DC, particularly those with predominantly African American subject matter. Non-museum goers might include residents of the Washington, DC metropolitan area (including those in the community surrounding the Anacostia Museum) and communities around other museums with predominantly African American subject matter. Three options include: (1) conducting a joint survey with visitors to other history museums to identify characteristics, motivations, and comfort levels of African American visitors; (2) surveying African Americans in the Mall area (probably largely federal employees) to determine attitudes toward museums and better understand museum visiting patterns, behaviors, expectations, and experiences; and (3) investigating the level of

Smithsonian and other museum visitation by African American Smithsonian OFEO employees via survey or focus groups to see whether they bring friends to the Smithsonian, and why or why not.

- ❖ *Marketing.* A mini-study of the low attendance at the Anacostia Museum, focusing on awareness of the museum and reasons for not visiting. This would involve conducting a series of focus group discussions with residents of neighborhoods surrounding the Anacostia Museum to establish their perceptions, expectations, and visitation barriers (comfort, education, and time, as well as monetary issues), and then following up the discussions with a survey of community residents.

Appendix A. Demographics of Interviewees

Age^a (# of interviewees)	
10-19	10
20-29	18
30-39	21
40-49	14
50-59	17
60 and above	16
Unknown	2
TOTAL	98

a. Estimated by the OP&A interviewer.

Race/Ethnicity (# of interviewees)	
African American	18
White American	64
Other ^a	16
TOTAL	98

a. Asian, Asian American, European, Latin American, mixed race, etc.

Gender (# of interviewees)	
Male	46
Female	52
TOTAL	98

Residence (# of interviewees)	
Local	44
Non-local	49
Unknown	5
TOTAL	98

Appendix B. Reflections of the Interviewers

Office of Policy and Analysis staff who conducted interviews was asked to write a short paragraph summarizing the overall impressions they got from talking with people about NMAAHC and its subject matter. These are presented below. These observations are, by definition, subjective and interpretive in nature.

* * *

I interviewed visitors in the 30-50 year range: six white and four African American. The subject of an African American museum interested all the interviewees in varying degrees; both races made repeated reference to gaining fair, objective insights. Interest in music also was evident across the board. However, white females appeared to be more interested in literature and culture. One of the most interesting interviewees was an Eastern European female who seemed to have the advantage of the “de Tocqueville factor.” She viewed the notion of an African American museum as an outsider, and pointed out some significant facts that tend to be overlooked by Americans. For example, she indicated that slightly over 200 years of history is a relatively short period. The expectation of resolving complex problems including racism may be unrealistic. I concluded that interviews with third parties can be a valuable source of information and learning.

* * *

I conducted my interviews in the Haupt and Ripley Gardens. Although the responsiveness and level of knowledge varied widely among interviewees, the visitors I spoke to seemed very comfortable speaking about the subject. What struck me most was the lack of consensus about how to address the subject area. Some interviewees felt strongly that the struggles of African Americans continue and must be confronted by the museum, while others felt this forum should be used to showcase the achievements of the African Americans and highlight the positives that are often overlooked. This seems to present quite a challenge to the museum—to accomplish its purpose without alienating visitors with either an overly dour sensibility or a glossed-over, “everything’s fine” presentation.

Also striking was the uniform desire for opportunities to hear African American music. Music was clearly the most highly sought-after content area—possibly because it allows a positive experience even for those visitors who want to confront the difficult parts of the African American experience. Whatever the reason, it certainly has resonance and drawing power, and should have a prominent place in the museum.

* * *

In interviewing visitors, I chose to talk mostly with visitors in the National Museum of the American Indian, because I felt that visitors there were likely to be drawn to NMAAHC because of their interest in both history and culture. I was struck by the depth of emotion that a number of the interviewees brought to the subject of African American history. I felt that they really wanted to see the world from that perspective, in a very visceral way. They want displays that will convey the facts, but that will also encourage them to inhabit as much as possible the multiple perspectives of both African Americans and non-African Americans. They want to feel history—up-close and personal—through real people with whom they can identify and relate. And I think underneath this perhaps is a desire to see themselves and the history of non-black Americans in a new way. They are seeking, I felt, a fresh, powerful narrative that will change the way things are—in their minds and in the world.

* * *

The issue that stood out most prominently in the interviews I conducted was how the museum would strike a balance between portrayals of triumph and adversity in African American history. Should thoughtful visitors leave the museum feeling uplifted by the obstacles African Americans have overcome, or concerned about lingering racial inequalities? Has the United States delivered on its promises to citizens of African descent—albeit only after an enormous struggle—or does it still owe them an enormous unpaid debt? What is the ideal balance between “We have come a long way” and “We still have a long way to go?” If the museum tilts too far in the direction of struggle and adversity, it risks perpetuating an image of African American victimization that arguably alienates many people of all races. If it tilts too far in the opposite direction, it risks coming off as sugar-coated and unreal. However, bearing this delicate balance in mind, it was surprising to me that many thoughtful respondents of all races were concerned that the new museum push visitors to confront even the ugliest aspects of African American history, so that the nation might continue its (fitful) progress toward greater justice and inclusion. I had expected most people—at least, most people who were not African American themselves—would prefer to downplay the guilty side of America’s relationship with its African American residents, in favor of a more upbeat message about social progress, cultural innovation, and triumph over adversity. This, however, was by no means the case among the individuals to whom I spoke.

* * *

I found considerable interest in African roots and in the many paths taken by African Americans over their history in the United States, as well as in the evolution of different aspects of African cultures over the course of U.S. history—an evolution that continues today. The history of slavery and other transgressions of the past seemed to be of interest not so much for itself, but to provide context for the present. The diversity of African Americans came up often. Resilience and

accomplishment were common themes; people wanted to celebrate the positive that has occurred despite oppression and a very un-level playing field. There was concern about the marginalization of the poor and the breakdown of the family.

* * *

I spoke mostly to people who were taking a break from visiting Smithsonian museums—around the National Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of the American Indian, in front of the Arts and Industries building, and in the Haupt Garden. I felt that, overall, people want the new museum to focus more on the positive—the accomplishments and progress of African Americans. I particularly noted one person’s comment that the new museum can be about redemption and having a shared experience. Even though these people said rather decisively that they did not want another Holocaust Museum, they also said in the same breath that it is important not to downplay the real history—especially as a lesson for the younger people.

I was struck by the differences in the various generations’ experience “markers” with African American history and culture; these, in turn, affect what they expect in the new museum. For example, some older Baby Boomers reminisced about the Civil Rights Movement, fondly recalling the common “heroes” of the sit-ins and marches. Younger (white) Baby Boomers had darker memories of the riots seen on television, but were lastingly affected by soul music and Motown. Younger generations related mostly to media and technology; their references were to rock and hip-hop musicians and to sports figures.

Interviewees explicitly talked about or implied that *de facto* segregation still occurs in some parts of the country, due to lingering racism and socio-economic differences. Will the new museum have some a role in making institutionalized racism more transparent? I suppose what surprised me most were the white Americans I encountered who insisted that, aside from some historical context, they had no personal experience with African American culture—for example, that they came from up North, did not grow up around blacks, did not have any black friends, and so on.

* * *

My interviewees were all white, middle-aged respondents in the Greater Richmond area. All were interested in the history of African American culture, especially music. The evolution of jazz from its indigenous roots in Africa was one appealing topic. Since we were in the shadow of Bojangles’ statue, personalities were frequently mentioned, as was the influence of black music on mainstream music. Personalities were also mentioned in relation to sports, literature, and politics.

The history of African American life and achievements in a repressive society, and the effects of those achievements on general American society, were of interest to these respondents. As one couple asked, “Where would America be today without those contributions?” These people were not focusing on the economic effects of slavery on plantations and cities, but rather on the inventions, achievements, and contributions of individuals. In fact, slavery was a given for them, but not mentioned as especially interesting. These individuals focused more on the positive side than on guilt. My respondents were interested in the total story of Africans in America—including free blacks, since many free blacks lived and worked in the area prior to the Civil War. The total story, one person commented, includes slaves in the North. They would like to see black history as local, individualized, and American rather than as a regional issue—that is, not an exclusively Southern issue. They wanted to know how blacks and whites lived together.

* * *

Most of my interviews took place at Union Station and on MARC commuting trains. I chose to conduct my interviews at these venues because the interviewees represent people who live in DC or close by and people who travel to DC for business and/or leisure. The interviewees were 25 to 50 years of age and from all backgrounds, such as African American, white, and Latino. They were interested in the development of the museum, and hoped that the content of the exhibitions not only focuses on slavery and the struggles in African American history, but also on African American accomplishments and cultural heritage. Most interviewees referred to the National Museum of American Indian because it is the newest Smithsonian museum. Several noted that they were not impressed with the museum’s exhibitions, and hope for better in the National Museum of African American History and Culture.



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