"This image became my touchstone. The framed photo has been a fixture in my office . . .
Whenever I tire of the work or the politics, I look at her and realize . . . that because she did
not quit, I have opportunities that she could never imagine."
CHAPTER ONE

Remembering My Past:
The Wisdom of Not Trying to Fight Uphill

(Written for this volume, 2010)

CATCH the nigger!” “Get him!” After more than 40 years, I can still hear those voices and the sound of the mob chasing me, still remember the fear. It amazed me how quickly a game could turn violent when race was a factor. I loved to play baseball, and for some reason I became involved in a game in a neighborhood far from my home. As the only black kid in my elementary school, I was used to integrating all sorts of activities, but this day was painfully different. I do not know what happened, but suddenly I became the target as 15 kids began to attack me with their bats and fists. A cacophony of voices resonated with both laughter and hatred. As a bat struck my arm, the force of the blow hurt but also freed me from their grasp, and I began to run. I ran and I ran and I ran. I stumbled down unfamiliar streets, through backyards and playgrounds, looking for a safe haven. And the mob was still coming. As I ran, it went through my mind that this is what it must have been like for a runaway slave. After all, this was the early 1960s and the Centennial of the Civil War had immersed us all in that history.

But unlike a runaway slave, I did not have the energy to go on. I was exhausted. So I headed up a driveway leading to a house that looked empty. Collapsing on the lawn, I saw the mob gleefully coming up the driveway. At that moment, I hated everything white. I hated the fact that I lived in an all-white town, I hated the beating that was to come at the hands of these white kids. And I hated feeling so scared, so helpless and so alone. But then the door of the house opened and a young girl stepped between me and the mob and ordered them off her property. As they retreated, I recall how quickly my emotions changed from hatred of white people to the realization that this young white girl saved me from a severe beating or worse. She saved me simply because she chose to confront a wrong. By not staying inside her house, she
taught me a great deal. Her actions became a beacon that reminded me not to prejudge or generalize about people—and always to intervene when someone needs help or when the cause is just. I never thanked her or even knew her name. But her courage helped to influence who I have become.

My moment with the mob was a crucial episode in my life because it forced me to confront issues and questions about courage, about the contradictions and ambiguities of race, about the possibility of change, and about fairness. I needed to understand why race mattered so much. Why racial considerations were so pervasive and painful where I grew up. Why some people hated me because of a pigment and why others saw beyond what we used to call laughingly “my permanent tan.” I needed to know why the parents of many of my elementary school friends would let me drink out of the garden hose but not out of a glass in their kitchen. Or why, when a teacher asked where my parents worked and I answered the Board of Education, she assumed that they were janitors rather than teachers.

I needed answers that would allow me to negotiate the challenges, assumptions, and very real barriers of race in post-World War II America. I wanted to determine methods that would let me accept the realities of race, but not be held captive by cultural and community assumptions. I needed answers that would permit me to navigate the many worlds that I encountered daily. Ultimately, I needed guidance that would enable me to grapple with the dilemma that W.E.B. DuBois first articulated in 1903 in The Souls of Black Folks when he wrote, “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.” Later he wrote that the African American “ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings . . . two warring ideals in one dark body.” This is what I wanted to know: How can you embrace difference but work towards sameness? How do you narrow—or at least bridge—the chasm of race that has divided America since its inception? And how can you remain undamaged and hopeful while fighting this good fight?

My life and career have been profoundly shaped by three factors. One is the challenge of wrestling with the omnipresent specter of race. A second is the importance of the past. And the third, the presence of my family, both living and dead.

Two people whose influence far outweighed the time we spent together were my paternal grandparents, Lonnie and Leanna Bunch. Lonnie, one of
THE RECENT PAST

the first black dentists in Newark, New Jersey, was known to everyone as "Doc." Both Doc and Leanna began life as sharecroppers on the plantations near Raleigh, North Carolina, where their enslaved ancestors once toiled. The Bunches worked on the Robertson farm, while Leanna's family labored on the Old Perry Plantation. They quickly realized that their hands and minds were made for more than picking cotton or serving as a domestic. Doc entered night school at Shaw College in Raleigh, eventually graduating in 1910 at age 28. Shaw was one of the wonderfully important black colleges formed after the Civil War, providing a nurturing environment where those not far removed from enslavement could seize the education that was often denied them by the outside world. Thanks to colleges like Shaw, families such as mine were transformed, eventually finding a place in the small African American middle class.

I can hardly imagine what it took for Doc to work the land by day and work the books by night. By 1910, 23-year-old Leanna had left North Carolina to "live in" as a servant for a wealthy Jewish family in Montclair, New Jersey. She worked in their home until she married Doc in 1912. From that point they turned their full attention to Lonnie's desire to attend the Dental School at Howard University. For the next few years, Doc and Leanna worked for the hotels in Atlantic City. She worked as a maid and domestic, while Doc made money as one of the black men who pushed the jitneys along the boardwalk, transporting the elite so they could sample the sea air without being jostled by the masses along the Jersey shore. Doc graduated Howard University in 1916 and settled into a 30-year practice in North Jersey, where he and Leanna were members of a small circle of black elite.

By the time I came along, Doc was a sickly old man who seemed to spend more time in bed than out. I soon learned that when I entered his bedroom, the presence of a small child was too much for him, so he would give me a nickel to go play somewhere else. I loved the notion of getting paid to play in another room. Whenever I could, I would burst into his room and make just a bit of noise. It worked every time. He would reach into his nightstand and give me a nickel. Bothering Doc became my first paying job.

Leanna was more of a presence in my young life. She was the engine that made all things happen. She was a very short but strong woman who imposed her will on all who came in contact with her. During the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan had unprecedented popularity even in the northern state of New Jersey.
One day, according to family lore, Leanna was on her way to the market, pulling her shopping cart that included a large sack to carry the groceries. As she walked up the hill to the market, several men in hoods returning from a Klan rally began to taunt her. As they moved closer, this small black woman calmly reached into her bag and drew a shotgun. As the story goes, the Klansmen "almost broke their necks running away from Leanna."

Even as a child, I was struck by how Leanna demanded respect. No one called her by any derogatory term like "Aunty." She was always Mrs. Bunch, said with equal amounts of respect and fear. I learned from her to expect fairness and to demand respect. I marvel at what Doc and Leanna were able to accomplish. I wonder where they garnered their strength. How did they imagine a world that was so different from anything that anyone in their family had experienced? They taught me that with struggle and hard work, one could create a new path of possibility.

On November 3, 1957, Leanna, seemingly in perfect health, died suddenly and without warning. The family's anchor was gone. Immediately after her death, my family moved into my grandparents' home to be with Doc. I have vivid memories of being awakened late at night by tearful screams. I can remember seeing my father and his sister, Alma, holding Doc as he walked the short hallways. I can still hear him crying out, "Leanna, how could you leave me? I was to go first!" This was a man devastated by the loss of his partner, the woman who helped to plot their escape from sharecropping and who was the foundation of all that they had accomplished. After all, she had helped to make once-unimaginable dreams come true. Together they made the transition from the rural south to the urban north. Together they not only built a life but they transformed the future trajectory of all their descendants. For two weeks Doc called for his Leanna. Then on the day before my fifth birthday, he died so that he could rejoin his bride.

My grandparents' deaths taught me a great deal about loss and love, about how nothing of value is accomplished without planning, sacrifice, and the help of those you love. But before they had died, they also instructed me about race, family and history—the three constants in my life. Leanna wanted to make sure that I could handle the challenges of race in America. So while she took care of my religious training, she was also concerned that I should be an example of a well-raised child. She did not want me to fit into anyone's stereotype about rowdy, unkempt, undereducated blacks. So she emphasized the proper dress and
public deportment. She often warned me not to get into street fights because I would be seen by our white neighbors as a ruffian, as someone whose actions confirmed their racist notions. I was told not to fight, to turn the other check—unless they called me a nigger. If that happened, Leanna said I was to fight and it did not matter how many were against me. I learned that if that word was used, it was better to lose the fight than to run from the challenge. I doubt if she ever read Claude McKay but her admonitions echoed his poem written during the Harlem Renaissance: “If we must die, let it be like men, pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back.”

Leanna forced me to confront evil. She helped me realize that although I could sometimes run, I could never hide from discrimination and from my own blackness. Often you had to fight, regardless of the consequences. It was Doc, however, who helped me appreciate that some of the answers I sought could be found by looking back into America’s history. And much of that history resided in the basement of my grandparent’s home. The unfinished and unadorned basement was a mysterious, fertile place that stimulated my imagination. Much of the basement space was taken up by the furnace and the coal bin. I loved listening as the small chunks of shiny coal were delivered via a noisy metal slide. The basement was also full of dusty and worn remnants of their past: old, outdated dental chairs, medical instruments that looked as if they were meant to cause pain rather than ease it, trunks full of clothes and old papers. And an array of books.

It was through these books that Doc opened a path to the past. Unlike my own children, I could not read at age four, so one of the joys of being with him was listening to him read. One day, he read a book that included some 19th-century images. One picture was of a class of students roughly my age. Doc said that since the picture was so old, the children were probably dead. I remember struggling, trying to understand how these young faces could no longer be living. Doc then read the caption, which stated “unidentified school children.” Then he said, “Isn’t it a shame that people can live their lives, die, and simply be forgotten?” I was so struck by his words. I wanted to know who those kids were. What kind of lives did they live? Did they eventually grow up to be happy or married? What did they do for work? Were they treated fairly? That moment began my fascination with history. It was years before I could articulate this interest, but from that instant I wanted to give voice to the anonymous and to make visible those who were often left out of the historical
narratives. And by doing that, I hoped that I could find answers that would help me, and later help America, wrestle with our tortured racial past.

"It is always smarter to fight bigots going downhill."

Alma Bunch Hartsfield, 1962

Growing up in Belleville, New Jersey, distinctions based on race were an obvious and seemingly immutable fact of life. Our house was located at the bottom of a hill, with both the elementary and high schools at the top of the crest. Often that walk up Greylock Parkway to the school was a path ripe with racial confrontations, large and small. Sometimes it was just the challenge of not overreacting to the name-calling that was a daily occurrence, such as the group of girls who would scream at me that “God must hate you because he made you so black!” More often, it was the need to fight my way to school. I must admit that it was not easy to fight on the way to class at 7:45 in the morning. Once as I tried to get my balance on the sloping street, I missed seeing the punch that knocked me down and cost me two teeth. As I ran home crying, I was greeted by my Aunt Alma who calmly said, "Son, it is always smarter to fight bigots going downhill." Thanks to my aunt, I realized that I needed to be more strategic in determining when to fight, and I had to accept the notion that you cannot fight everybody. After all, I had only so many teeth to lose.

In many ways, the fighting bothered me less than the experience of suffering small but painful racial indignities. It was the capriciousness of racism that made these moments so difficult. You never knew when race would be used to challenge, humiliate or marginalize. It could be in the classroom during a world history class when it was time to study the chapter on Africa. Usually the images in the book were stereotypical, with natives in various stages of undress. The content was as foreign to me as it was to the other students. But the teacher would say, “So, Lonnie, tell us about Africa,” much to the raucous delight of my white classmates. Or it was during my first practice as a member of the varsity football team when the school’s director of athletics loudly asked if he could touch my head because “rubbing the head of a Negro is good luck.” I put on my helmet, made an obscene gesture and walked away. Or at a party to celebrate our high school graduation, when a classmate walked up and explained that her parents “hated black people” and that I would have to leave, but she “hoped that I would understood.” I think the great Olympian Jesse
Owens was correct when he said, “Bigotry always begins with a hurt... And the hurt was soul-shattering sometimes.”

Yet I was lucky, because with that hurt came lessons that have served me throughout my life and my museum career. I learned the importance of confronting fear and facing difficult or unpleasant situations head on. There was no way to avoid the issues surrounding race, so I might as well grapple with them immediately. I understood that sometimes the best way to confront fear was through simply acknowledging it. During the height of the Civil Rights movement, my family would continue to drive from New Jersey to North Carolina to visit my mother’s family. This was before the proliferation of “superhighways,” and the trip down south took nearly 15 hours. As my Dad was the sole driver, there were times when he just needed a break. I remember my father stopping for a smoke in the parking lot of a motel in southern Virginia. I suddenly realized that he was standing under the “Whites Only” sign that was such a prominent reminder of racial segregation in the early 1960s. I was so worried, but he leisurely finished his cigarette. When he returned to the car, he noticed my unease and said, “But this is my America as well.” Sometimes just facing evil was victory enough.

In the 1943 movie Casablanca, Claude Rains asks Humphrey Bogart where he had successfully concealed a document that Rains had wanted to get his hands on. When told it had been hidden in the piano, Rains says, “That what I get for not being musical.” While I was also not musical, grappling with race has taught me the importance of the musical term “improvisation.” Because there were no easy answers to issues of race, it was important to become nimble and comfortable with ambiguity. I learned not only how to handle the unexpected, but I was schooled in understanding the appropriateness of certain responses: when to use humor and when to confront; when to fight and when to retreat; when to find allies and when to set out on your own.

A sense of improvisation rescued me from some difficult situations. Just before my senior year in High School, I was invited to attend a football camp of all-star players from New Jersey, New York, Connecticut and Pennsylvania. The camp was held on the campus of Marist College in Poughkeepsie. Throughout the week, tensions began to develop between the black and white players. One day I entered the cafeteria, noticed how long the line was, and just cut to the front. I was confronted by a very large lineman who was on his way to play football for Coach Bear Bryant at the University of Alabama. As he blocked my path, he said that he was tired of “loud-mouth black guys”
and he was ready to fight. I knew that this guy would easily destroy me. So I improvised. He mentioned loud-mouth black guys, so I became one. I started talking: what would be accomplished by hurting me? What would his victory prove? I talked until he got tired of hearing me, and he left. Like a line from a 1960s soul ballad by Fontella Bass, luck and improvisation “rescued me.”

Probably the most important skill in wrestling with race is simply how to judge, understand and deal with people. Throughout America’s history, African Americans’ survival often depended upon their ability to comprehend and decode what Langston Hughes called “the ways of white folks.” This acquired knowledge provided essential insight. During the period of slavery, this insight was the foundation of a day-to-day resistance to enslavement called “putting on the master.” Recognizing that they were involved in a power relation of unequals, the enslaved used their understanding of the owner’s attitudes and assumptions to level the playing field. Slaves feigned ignorance of the owner’s instructions, broke tools to delay the start of the workday, or slowed the pace of their work songs to limit their productivity. All was based on their ability to comprehend the nuances and subtleties of the situation they faced. I, too, learned how to evaluate quickly and to move nimbly. To limit the pain of surprise, I acquired an ability to read body language well before I ever heard the phrase. And the skill of “reading a room” has proven quite helpful whether in meetings with museum trustees, members of Congress, potential donors, or curatorial colleagues. As Kinshasha Holman Conwill, the deputy director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, is fond of remarking, “Being tone deaf in gatherings, public or private, is not conducive to success.” For me, grappling with the color line has taught me to listen, to assess with speed and care, and to find peace with unpredictability and ambiguity: all skills that serve a museum director well.

Ultimately, life along the color line impressed upon me a dedication to fairness, a commitment to fighting the good fight, a desire to ease the pain of those who suffered discrimination and injustice. I always hearken back to when we played a sport in my neighborhood. The captains, usually the oldest boys, took turns choosing their team members. I remember watching as other kids were selected before me, usually because no one wanted the black kid on their team. Eventually my athletic ability made me a valued teammate. And later when I became a captain, I remembered the hurt of not knowing whether you would get a chance to play. So I always chose the worst player—the one who was too heavy or too uncoordinated—to be on my team. Once I was
the outsider, and I have never forgotten the hurt of exclusion. In many ways, I
have sought throughout my career to understand and to embrace the outsider.
To help us all become more knowledgeable about and more comfortable with
ambiguity and with life along the margins.

“We are not makers of history, we are made by history.”

Martin Luther King, Jr., 1963

There are so many elements, so many moments that shape a life and help
chart a career. The contours of my life were formed by a seemingly random
and dizzying array of factors: the powerful models of possibility that were
my parents and grandparents; the stories of migration, of Jackie Robinson, of
broken hearts and unmet expectations that I heard at family barbecues; the
ability to catch a football or hit a baseball; growing up in New Jersey (I am still
able to curse in Sicilian); going “down south” to visit family every summer;
chopping peanuts on the family farm and realizing that being a farmer was
exhausting work; and the unexpected wonders of Howard and American
Universities.

Yet as a consistent and meaningful presence, few things compare with
the importance of history in my life. To me, history is much more than an
academic discipline, much more than a collective series of names and dates,
of events long forgotten. History was and will always be my muse, a muse
that provided sanctuary and stimulated creativity. History became my teacher
and my protector. Studying the past became a barometer that helped me to
measure America’s commitment to fairness and a mirror that brought clarity
and candor to issues of race and discrimination. Ultimately, history became my
weapon of choice in the struggle for justice and racial equality, and the shield
that gave me courage to face the challenge of race in my own life.

But at first, embracing history was simply a means of escape. I seemed
to confront issues of race in all the corners of my existence: from school to
the Boy Scouts to the athletic field. Yet the burdens of race seemed to ease
as my fascination with history grew. After devouring all of the books in my
grandparent’s basement, I discovered the knowledge, the historical joy and
wisdom that seemed locked in the Belleville Public Library. Here I could
escape into the mysteries of the past with the hope that I might find answers
to the mysteries of my racial present. In those stacks, I was surrounded by
a seemingly infinite number of books of history and biography. Until I left
Belleville to attend college, I was an obsessive visitor to the library. I must have read every biography in the building; the subject and the time period did not matter. I was fascinated by the stories of Elias Howe and the invention of the sewing machine, of botanist Luther Burbank, of World War II journalist Ernie Pyle, of colonial general "Mad Anthony" Wayne, of the pioneering nurse Florence Nightingale and the Women’s Rights activist Susan B. Anthony. And maybe the fact that I worked my way through the biographies of every president (you can imagine how difficult it was to finish Millard Fillmore) sparked my interest and led me to co-curate a major exhibition on the American presidency later in my career. As I learned about the lives of others, I found a peace. No one called me names when I was reading a book. And the only punches that I had to duck were the ones thrown by the characters in the books.

Soon studying the past became much more than a means of escape. It became a source of knowledge and encouragement that helped me find answers to the question of why race mattered so much in my life and in the creation and evolution of America. As my education progressed I found myself reading less about American presidents and more about unacknowledged heroes, such as Frederick Douglass, Fannie Lou Hamer and Ida B. Wells, less about inventors and more about activists. While I continued to enjoy the poetry of e.e. cummings and Emily Dickinson, I found greater satisfaction and edification in the writing of Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson and Ntozake Shange. Delving deeply into the history of the long and unending struggle for racial justice not only told me a great deal about America, but it also helped me to understand my place, my world. Reading history helped me to understand that the factors I once thought universal and immutable were really socially constructed elements that could be confronted and changed. In essence, I realized that not only was profound racial change possible, it was transpiring all around me.

I found so much that is useful in America’s history. This history is both a source of inspiration and optimism that continues to shape my work and life. And yet if one looks at the history of black America, it might be easy to miss the stories of hope and possibility. As I work to create the newest museum of the Smithsonian, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, I am struck by how many of the people we survey hope that we will downplay the story of slavery. To some, this is a negative story that emphasizes victimization and powerlessness, and it should be countered by emphasizing
famous firsts and positive images. I can see how the history of the cruelty and loss of the slave trade and the violence and attack on family and culture that were central to antebellum slavery can be difficult for America to embrace. But I see this history as a story not only of tragedy, but also of triumph and resiliency. I am not embarrassed by my slave ancestors. In fact, I am inspired by their strength, their ability to maintain their culture and their sense of family and community. I marvel at the enslaved woman who would feed her children before she had to spend the day laboring in the field, then return home with the resolve to never let that field, the institution of slavery, strip her of her commitment to family, her humor or her humanity. I wish I had their strength.

Though I do not, I still draw strength and sustenance from their lives. In the late 1980s, I was working on an exhibition for the National Museum of American History. Then titled “Land of Promise,” the exhibition was to explore the history of the United States during the 19th century. I was researching the history of slavery so that it could be a central element in the exhibition. While exploring the holdings of the museum’s Division of Photography, I found a picture labeled “genre study.” It was a fascinating image, taken in the late 1870s, of an African American woman who was once enslaved. I was drawn to the image because the woman’s diminutive stature reminded me of my grandmother. The small woman is walking up a slight incline holding in one hand a large garden hoe that is taller than she is. In her other arm she cradles a large basket used for harvesting corn or potatoes. Her hair is wrapped neatly but her dress is tattered, showing where the clothes had been mended. Her knuckles are swollen, probably from the years of exhausting labor in the fields. She is clearly weary but there is pride in her posture and she is moving forward despite all she is carrying. This image became my touchstone. The framed photo has been a fixture in my office ever since. Whenever I tire of the work or the politics, I look at her and realize that if she could go on, so can I. Whenever I am ready to quit because the challenges seem insurmountable, I look to her and I realize that because she did not quit, I have opportunities that she could never imagine.

It was not until my immediate family began to dwindle that I turned my historical training on my own history. The earliest of the Bunch ancestors that I found was an enslaved woman named Candis Bunch, whose name I discovered attached to the marriage license of her son, my great grandfather Oscar Bunch. One day while doing other work at the National Archives, I decided to steal a few hours to see if I could find more information on Candis. After many
hours of finding nothing, I stumbled on the mortality schedules of the 1870 U.S. Census, which listed Candis Bunch as dying in 1870 as a 40-year-old freed woman in Wake County, North Carolina. I could not believe I had found her. I then begin to search the records of the Freedman Bureau, the first federal entity created to assist the newly freed slaves in their transition from slavery to freedom. This was a fool’s errand because the records are chaotic and hard to use. Just when I was about to give up, I unearthed a labor contract between Candis and a landowner named Fabius H. Perry. The document revealed that Candis received $11.00 for 44 days of farm work in 1867. The record also showed what items Candis bought from Perry, such as seed cotton and starch. But most amazing was the discovery of a direct connection between Candis and my own life. When I was a child, my grandmother Leanna would spoil me by baking cookies in the shape of hearts and crescent moons. And there in this 19th century labor contract was a record that Candis paid 60 cents for two baking tins in the shape of hearts and crescents. Here was someone with so little income, but she spent some of that precious money so she could bake cookies for her family. When I realized the connection to my own life, it was enough to reduce me to tears in the research room of the National Archives. I am in awe of people like Candis who, despite all they experienced, preserved their humanity and protected their families as best they could. Who could imagine that crescent-shaped cookies were one woman’s weapon in the struggle to find fairness and equality in America?

In 1969, Stokely Carmichael, the activist best remembered for popularizing the term “black power,” was quoted as proclaiming, “I hate racism and I’m out to smash it, or it’s going to smash me.” While I was never as explicit publicly as Stokely Carmichael, we shared a desire to find ways to help America live up to its stated ideals of equality and provide unfettered access to certain “unalienable rights.” For Carmichael, his tool was the concept of “black power.” For me, history is my weapon in the struggle for racial justice. During the mid 1990s when the Smithsonian Institution was embroiled in controversy surrounding its “Enola Gay” exhibition, I was asked by a member of Congress if I had a political agenda. While I did not know how to answer that question then, I now know that I do have a political agenda: to use history to make America better. History is such an important weapon because it provides a context for understanding, a context that teaches us that what is was not always so. And that change, even profound change, is possible. For me, history illuminates all the dark corners so that we can make informed choices, allowing us to better
fulfill our obligations as citizens and to understand the daunting challenges faced by our nation.

History is also that wonderfully unforgiving mirror that forces us to see what we often hope to avoid. It is a mirror that challenges and inspires by helping us to remember. To remember that change is not without loss and sacrifice. But that change has been the one constant in America’s history. History reminds us that no longer are men and women sold on auction blocks because of the color of their skin; that people are not lynched without cause or consequence; and that Jim Crow segregation is no longer the law of the land. In short, history has given us models to emulate, models of struggle, models of success, and models of perseverance and resiliency. History is, as my mentor John Hope Franklin was want to say, “the great corrective.” It is a weapon that prods and motivates by recalling what we once were, contextualizing our contemporary conditions, and pointing us toward what we can become. Looking back may hurt, but it also leads to healing and true racial reconciliation.

"Run, run, as fast as you can, you can’t catch me, I’m the gingerbread man.”

*NURSERY RHYME*

A reoccurring image from my youth is one of running on the football field. I remember carrying the football and making would-be tacklers miss. And then I was free, running with no one near. No one could catch me. I was free of the challenges of race, free of the burdens of family expectations, free from the taunts and humiliations, free from school. Just free. But I could not run forever. It was my love of history that helped me to stop running. It was the study of history that helped me to understand and to make sense of the changing racial dynamics of America. And it was history that gave me a career where I could marry my love of the past with a desire to contribute to a fairer tomorrow.

While history provided much needed tools, it was my family that taught me to believe, to believe and have faith, even when there seemed to be no reason to believe that change was possible. It was my family that provided me the models of excellence, perseverance, compassion, resiliency and optimism. Ultimately my family taught me that there is a time to run and a time to fight. But there is never a time to stop trying to make your country a better place.
CHAPTER FIVE

Embracing Ambiguity: The Challenge of Interpreting African American History in Museums

(This essay is adapted from a speech first given in 2005.)

EARLY in my career I crafted an exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History that was to explore the role and history of American slavery. I traveled throughout the American south searching for an extant slave cabin that I could use in the exhibition. Ultimately, I found a cabin on the old Friendfield Plantation that was located in the rice producing area of the Wacamaw Neck near Georgetown, South Carolina. After driving past an array of swamps, I came to a "slave street," an area that contained twelve slave cabins and a small church. There I met Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson was the grandson of a slave who had resided in one of these cabins from the 1850s until her death in the 1930s. Mr. Johnson talked about how the slaves did a "hard sweep" that eliminated the grass and weeds that were the home to vermin. Then we walked to the side where the chimney was located and he spoke about the role that slave children played in maintaining the chimneys to prevent fires. And then we moved to the rear of the cabin where he explained how slaves used that space to grow food crops that supplemented the food that was provided by the owners. Finally, I walked to the fourth side but Mr. Johnson did not follow me. After repeatedly asking him to accompany me, I demanded to know why he left me alone on that side of the cabin. Finally he looked at me and said that he would not move in my direction because the area "was full of poisonous snakes."

After I stopped running, I asked why he did not warn me. He said that everyone around here knows the history of that spot. And then he said, "People need to remember not just what they want, but what they need. It pains the ancestors when we forget." His words—"people need to remember"—have never left me.

Ultimately, Mr. Johnson called for people to remember not simply out of
nostalgia but because history—especially African American history—provides useful tools and lessons that help us navigate contemporary life. The best museum presentations can help people find that meaningful and useable past. Yet not everyone believes that this nation should remember, and especially when these memories include and are fundamentally shaped by African American history and culture.

The notion that African American history has limited meaning should be a concern for all Americans. We would be better served if we remember the words that James Baldwin wrote in his novel, *The Fire Next Time*:

"History does not refer merely or even principally to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and that history is literally present in all that we do."

So in this essay, I want to explore why the interpretation and preservation of African American History and Culture in museums are so important and relevant for an America still struggling with the legacy and impact of race. What are the challenges that museums face as they struggle to help the people remember a fuller, richer, and more complex history?

You can tell a great deal about a country or a people by what they deem important enough to remember, what they build monuments to celebrate, and what graces the walls of their museums. Throughout Scandinavia there are monuments and museums that cherish the Vikings as a proud symbol of Nordic curiosity, exploration, and freedom. In Scotland, much is made of the heroic struggles of William Wallace (whom we came to know through film as Mel Gibson) to throw off the yoke of British domination. Until recently, South Africa was dominated by monuments and memories of the Vortexker, while the United States traditionally revels in Civil War battles or founding fathers, with an occasional president thrown into the mix.-

Yet I would argue that we learn even more about a country by what it chooses to forget. This desire to omit—to forget disappointments, moments of evil, and great missteps—is both natural and instructive. It is often the essence of African American culture that is forgotten or downplayed. And yet, it is also the African American experience that is a clarion call to remember.

A good example of this nexus of race and memory is one of the last great unmentionables of public discourse about American history—the story of slavery. For nearly 250 years, slavery not only existed, but it was one of the
most dominant forces in American life. Political clout and economic fortune depended upon the labor of slaves. Almost every aspect of American life—from business to religion, from culture to commerce, from foreign policy to western expansion—was informed and shaped by the experience of slavery. American slavery was so dominant globally that at one point 90 percent of the world’s cotton was produced in the American south. By 1860 the monetary value of slaves outweighed all the money invested in this country’s railroads, banking, and industry combined. And the most devastating war in American history was fought over the issue of slavery.

And yet few institutions address this history for a non-scholarly audience. And there are even fewer opportunities to discuss—candidly and openly—the impact, legacy, and contemporary meaning of slavery.

I remember a small survey from the early 1990s that assessed the public’s knowledge about slavery. The results were fascinating: 81 percent of white respondents felt that slavery was a history that had little to do with them; 73 percent felt that slavery was an important story but that its real relevance was only to African Americans. Even more troubling was the fact that the majority of African Americans surveyed expressed either little interest or some level of embarrassment about slavery.

There is a great need to help Americans understand that the history of slavery matters because so much of our complex and troubling struggle to find racial equality has been shaped by slavery. And until we use the past to better understand the contemporary resonance of slavery, we will never get to the heart of one of the central dilemmas in American life—race relations. But it is also important for those who preserve and interpret African American life to help combat the notion of embarrassment. I am not ashamed of my slave ancestors, I am in awe of their ability—in spite of the cruelties of slavery—to maintain their culture, their sense of family, their humor and their humanity. I wish more people knew the words of William Prescott, a former slave who, when asked about slavery by a WPA interviewer in the 1930s said, “They will remember that we were sold but not that we were strong; they will remember that we were bought but not that we were brave.”

There is a great need and opportunity to draw inspiration, sustenance, and guidance from African American culture. And from this inspiration, people can find tools and paths to help them live their lives. The importance of inspiration was brought home to me on a trip a few years ago.
In 1997, I was lecturing in South Africa. One day I found myself in the small city of Pietermaritzburg, which is located in Durban in Kwa Zulu Natal. This city has a significant Indian population and it was the site of Mahatma Gandhi’s first brush with the racism of South Africa in 1903. While I was there, Nelson Mandela came to this city that was the ancestral homeland of his political and tribal rivals, the Zulus. He was to receive “the freedom of the city.” I was privileged to sit on the podium as Mandela gave his speech. As is his custom, he spoke in several languages—from Xhosa to Zulu to N’dbele—about his struggles against apartheid. And then in English he spoke about his 27 years in the prison on Robben Island. He said one of the things that gave him strength and substance was the history of the struggle for racial equality in America. He spoke passionately and eloquently of how American abolitionists such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass inspired him and helped him to believe that freedom and racial transformation were possible in South Africa.

Mandela’s words helped me to remember the power of African American culture. We hold such important moments within our collective institutions. Who could not be inspired by the oratory, the commitment to racial justice, or the ultimate sacrifice of Dr. King? Who is not moved by the beauty of the work of Betty Saar, the richness of the words of Langston Hughes or the quiet bravery of Rosa Parks and John Lewis? Who is not moved by the family that came north during the Great Migration, or by the person who struggled and risked death to keep his name on a voter registration list during the 1960s? It is crucial to remember that we are all made better by embracing the inspirational stories and lessons of African American culture.

Far too often, many view the experiences of the African American community as an interesting and occasionally exotic ancillary story that has limited impact on most Americans. Yet the story of how race, how African American culture has shaped and continues to re-shape American life, is less understood than it should be. It is important that we help all to grapple with the centrality of race in the construction of American identity.

As America continues its internal debates about who we are as a nation and what our core values are, where better to look than through the lens of African American history and culture? If one wants to understand the notion of American resilience, optimism, or spirituality, where better than the black experience? If one wants to explore the limits of the American dream,
where better than by examining the Gordian knot of race relations? If one wants to understand the impact and tensions that accompany the changing demographics of our cities, where better than the literature and music of the African American community? African American culture has the power and the complexity needed to illuminate all the dark corners of American life, and the power to illuminate all the possibility and ambiguities of American life. One of the challenges before us, whether we write, preserve or exhibit history or consume culture, is to do a better job of centralizing race.

A final reason why African American history and culture are still so vital, so relevant, and so important is because the black past is a wonderful but unforgiving mirror that reminds us of America’s ideals and promises. It is a mirror that makes those who are often invisible more visible, and it gives voice to many who are often overlooked. It is a mirror that challenges us to be better, and to work to make our community and country better. But it is also a mirror that allows us to see our commonalities. It is a mirror that allows us to celebrate and to revel, but also demands that we all struggle, that we all continue to “fight the good fight.”

So the question before us is this: How well have museums done and what are the challenges that they face today? When all else fails, historians can always rely on a quotation from W.E.B. DuBois. His oft-cited line that the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line is quite appropriately applied to the state of museums in the 21st century.

One of the key challenges that cultural institutions face is how to wrestle effectively with, and cross, the color line. If museums are truly to be institutions that the public admires and trusts, then more museums should expend the political and cultural capital, take the risks, to help their visitors find a useful, usable, inclusive, and meaningful history that engages us all.

No one can deny that change has occurred. In the late 1970s, the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) was embroiled in a minor controversy about race. African American veterans of World War II, especially members of the all-black fighter squadrons known as the Tuskegee Airmen (so named because they received their aviation training on the campus of Tuskegee Institute), voiced their concerns that the National Air and Space Museum intentionally underplayed the important contributions of black aviators in the Second World War. Soon a few members of Congress, most notably Senator Ted Kennedy, inquired about the role of African American history at the Smithsonian
Institution. One of the ways that the NASM responded to these public and congressional inquiries was to ask several African American staff members to allow their likenesses to grace mannequins that would be placed in the museum in order to increase the “black presence.” Ultimately, these figures were positioned in airplanes or exhibit settings that were so high up or so far removed that the only way the public could view this increased presence was by scanning the outer reaches of the museum using binoculars purchased in the gift shop.

Clearly in today’s museums African American history is no longer at the fringe of the profession. For those who study or who are interested in the African American past, there have been many imaginative exhibitions over the last 15 years that have stretched the interpretive parameters and challenged the tenor and the color of historical presentations in museums.

The past decade has been a period of growth, excitement and possibility; museums as diverse as the National Museum of American History, the New-York Historical Society, the Chicago Historical Museum, the Oakland Museum and the Henry Ford Museum have wrestled creatively with African American subject matter. Even more important and instructive is the array of smaller institutions like the Please Touch Museum in Philadelphia, the Geneva Historical Society, and the Levine Museum of the New South and the Mexican Fine Art Center and Museum in Chicago that have sought to give local meaning to the issues of race in America. And African American museums in Detroit, Los Angeles, Chicago and New York all continue to explore the impact, legacy, and continuing importance of race in American life.

As a consequence of these activities, the public has experienced exhibitions that explored African American migration from the South to the North, like Spencer Crew's “From Field to Factory”; slavery in New York; ethnicity, race and adolescence in the Chicago Historical Museum’s Teen Chicago; representations of race in American art; the photography of James Van Der Zee and Gordon Parks; urbanization and community development; and the intersection of race and gender. The research and exhibition of African American life in museums has contributed a vibrancy and relevance that has invigorated many of the nation's cultural institutions, and sparked useful collaborations between museums and communities. There is a sense of accomplishment and completion felt by many public historians.

While there have been great changes in whom and what museums
interpret, it is much too soon to be satisfied with the American museum profession's efforts in exploring African American culture. Often the rhetoric of change fails to match the realities of everyday life in museums. My major concern is that museums are too often crafting exhibitions that simply say "African Americans were here, too," rather than examining the complexities, interactions and difficulties of race in America. In essence, much of what institutions create today is better suited to the world of 40 years ago, when blacks, in the words of novelist Ralph Ellison, "were invisible men and women," and whites needed to be reminded that African American history and culture mattered. Presentations for the 21st century need to better reflect the clashes, compromises, broken alliances, failed expectations and contested terrain that shape the perspectives of today's audiences.

Despite two decades of substantive progress and change, whiteness is still the gold standard in museums. While there have been many exhibitions and many moments to celebrate, I am not convinced that these exhibitions have as far reaching and as permanent an impact as one might believe. While many of these presentations introduced newer, more diverse audiences to cultural institutions, the relationships are not often nurtured or sustained. Often museums "check off" the African American exhibition and return to business as usual once the exhibition has closed. And business as usual is celebrating whiteness.

So despite our successes, there is a need to move the presentation of African American culture in America's museums to a higher level: a level that embraces long-term change; a level that includes a more holistic and diverse view of the African American experience; and a level that recognizes the need for new paradigms and alternative structures that shape both the products and the process of exploring the black past in museums.

For museums to better explore and present African American culture, they must overcome or at least grapple with a few core challenges:

The Challenge of Transcending the Rosy Glow of the Past

Langston Hughes once wrote a poem that included the lines, "life for me ain't been no crystal stair, it is full of tacks, rips and uneven steps." This poem suggests that the path to equality was not linear and not without setbacks and moments of defeat. Yet many of the exhibitions in our museums that explore America's racial heritage view the past through a prism of optimism, a path of
linear and inevitable progress that romanticizes African American history. The African American community is depicted as comprised of upwardly mobile heroes to whom racism and discrimination were simply obstacles that would eventually be overcome. While this often occurred, it was more the exception than the rule during much of America's history.

What is lacking is a commitment to explore the full range of African American experiences, including the difficulties, the controversies and the defeats. Too few museums wrestle effectively with the harsh realities of black life. Too many museums, and rarely explore in depth, issues of violence, arbitrary abuses of power, lynchings and the devastating effects of generations of poverty and discrimination. For every example of a Chicago Historical Museum or New-York Historical Society that mounted exhibitions on lynching, scores avoided that subject. And for every attempt by museums such as the New Jersey Historical Society to explore the urban unrest of the 1960s, many other museums in cities affected by the long, hot summers of the 1960s simply remain silent.

I am not calling for museums to focus only on the difficult and the unpleasant, or to depict African Americans as victims. I simply hope that museums provide visitors with a richly nuanced history that is replete with great joy and great sorrow and that helps visitors to see that museums do more than offer simple answers to the complex questions of the past.

The Challenge of Resisting Monolithic Depictions of the Past

When one reads African American literature, whether it is the urban poetry of Langston Hughes, or the rich depiction of racial joys and sorrows in the plays of August Wilson; or when we tap our toes to Aretha Franklin, Sam Cooke, or Run DMC, we are struck by the rich mosaic of African American life. In this literature and in this music, we are introduced to a black world that abounds with differences based on class, region, gender, color, education and spirituality. Yet far too few exhibitions convey this rich diversity or explore the meanings of these differences for the audience. Rarely is this richness captured. In fact most exhibitions explore the black community through the lens of the middle class. While the black middle class is central to our understanding of aspects of black life and aspirations, simply viewing that history obscures the full range of African American experiences. By resisting this rush to monolithic depictions of the past, museums can help visitors better understand the conflicts,
negotiations, and shifting coalitions that have comprised the black community. By exploring topics such as labor practices, burial practices, storefront religions, cultural institutions are more likely to provide a richer and a more complex lens into the African American past.

The Challenge of Ambiguity

People often visit museums in search of uncomplicated narratives, in search of simple answers to complex questions, and in search of confirmation of memories and traditions. And far too frequently, museums have crafted exhibitions that have satisfied the need for celebration, comfort, and closure. Our goal should be to provide opportunities for audiences to embrace and even revel in the ambiguities of the past. Historians know much about the complexity of the past and the nuances and agency that shape cultural interaction. Yet museums are not as effective as they could be in conveying that ambiguity to the public. I would argue that one of the signs of successful exhibitions or programs is whether the audience becomes more comfortable with ambiguity and with complexity. This is especially germane when museums interpret African American culture.

The Most Important Challenge is the Need to End a “New Integration” that Re–centers African American History

Brown v Board of Education legally ended segregation in America in 1954. Yet Jim Crow segregation is alive and well in America’s museums; museums seem comfortable embracing the notion of separate but equal when it comes to African American culture. Far too frequently, African American culture is segregated from the other more “mainstream” stories that museums explore. Either African American culture is interpreted as an interesting and occasionally educational episode that has limited meaning for non-African American visitors or it is trumpeted as a special attraction that is more exotic than instructive.

What is missing is a new synthesis—a “new integration”—that encourages visitors to see that exploring issues of race is essential to their understanding of American culture. Museums have been less successful when it comes to conveying the centrality of race in the construction of American national and regional identity. And they have often failed to help visitors understand that
African American culture is a wonderful lens to understand the American experience.

The key to this new integration is the creation of exhibitions that depict the interaction among African Americans and the broader society. These presentations would explore the clashes, the conflicts, compromises and cultural borrowing that is at the core of the American past. If museums do their job right, the public will see a duality that is evident in lines crafted by Langston Hughes:

I am the American heartbreak
The Rich on which freedom
Stumps its toe
The great mistake
That Jamestown
Made long ago

And yet, as the poet states in another poem, “I, too, am America.”

So, in closing, it is important to acknowledge that African American culture has a permanent home in America’s museums. But there is still much to do to reach the Promised Land. A former slave, Cornelius Holmes, was quoted as saying in 1939: “Though the slavery question is settled, its impact is not. The Question will be with us always. It is in our politics, in our courts, on our highways, in our manner and in our thoughts—all the day—every day.”

What a gift it will be when museums help the public understand that they are shaped and touched by African American history—all the day, every day.