NMAAHC

INTERPRETING TOUGH TOPICS WITH DIGNITY

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Interpreting Tough Topics with Dignity

Presenter:
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“We Must Tell the Unvarnished Truth”
- John Hope Franklin * NMAAHC
The opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture was a 13-year journey to foster a broader understanding of the black experience in a national and international context,” said Lonnie Bunch, the museum’s founding director, now the first African American Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. “It has truly become a place of healing, reconciliation, and celebration where people can embrace—not only African American history and culture, but—how that layered history has shaped America’s identity.” 100 YEARS IN THE MAKING!

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History of Representation of African & African American People in Museums around the US

“The opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture was a 13-year journey to foster a broader understanding of the black experience in a national and international context,” said Lonnie Bunch, the museum’s founding director, now the first African American Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. “It has truly become a place of healing, reconciliation, and celebration where people can embrace—not only African American history and culture, but—how that layered history has shaped America’s identity.” 100 YEARS IN THE MAKING!
African/African American art, history and culture have not always been so present and popular in US museums. According to a 2007 article by Faith Davis Ruffins and Paul Ruffins, “It is easy to forget that just thirty years ago some people wondered if there was enough Black history to even fill up a week. In 1968 a CBS television special, Black History Lost, Missing or Stolen?, captured the then-current feeling that no one knew, or had preserved, the true story of African American contributions to this society.”

“In the nearly thirty years since then, a generation of scholars and activists have created an explosion in the growth and celebration of Black art, history and culture that ends the myth that the story of African Americans was unrecoverable.”

Early attempts to preserve African American history were autobiographies of Africans in America — once known as “slave narratives” — whose authors sought to record their own stories for posterity. Some were published in Spanish and Dutch as early as the 1500s.

Few opportunities to preserve their history until the 1820s, when communities of free Black people grew large enough to give birth to Black newspapers and other institutions. The first literary and historical society was founded in Philadelphia in 1828.

Slave narratives in 1830s become more widespread (Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth).

In 1867, Hampton Institute started the first African American Museum.
Black Materials in White Institutions:

- White collectors stole and preserved millions of Native American objects from this time. They did not, however, do the same with Black objects and artifacts, which they considered unremarkable. The whites most actively collecting African American materials at this time were physical anthropologists and scientific racists. The Smithsonian Institution, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago collected African and African American skeletons which social-Darwinists used to support their claims that Black people were a less evolved race.
The turn of the century saw the establishment of several private libraries such as the American Negro Academy (D.C., 1897) and the Negro Society for Historical Research (New York, 1902).

Two of the most outstanding collectors of this period were Dr. Jesse Edward Moorland and Arthur Alonzo Schomburg.
Dr. Melville Herskovits was the first white American scholar to investigate the survival of elements of African culture in the New World.

Traveling between West Africa, the Caribbean and South America, with the help of his wife, Frances, he emerged as one of the earliest major collectors of African and Diaspora materials — which included manuscripts, books and artworks. After he started teaching in 1927 at Northwestern University, he built one of the most important collections in the United States. Upon his death, his books remained at Northwestern. The artworks and artifacts, however, were transferred to the Schomburg collection which had become part of the New York City Library system.
The Black Museum Movement, 1950-1980:

Before 1950, there were very few Black museums. Most of these were on Black college and university campuses and focused on library and fine art collections. However, between 1950 and 1980 — which encompasses the Civil Rights, Black Power and Black Consciousness eras — more than ninety African American museums were founded in the U.S. and Canada.
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**White Institutions in the Black Consciousness Era:**

- Until recently, most major American museums — even the newer “living history” museums — continued to exclude or ignore African American materials, with the exception of a few artists.
  - Places with pasts that historically included African Americans, would totally erase them/leave them out of the narrative (Mystic Seaport, CT, or Colonial Williamsburg)

- History of the Smithsonian and its incorporation of African and African American representation in their museums:
  - Lack of diversity criticized.
  - Turning point with the establishment of the annual Festival of American Folklife; followed by the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum and museums developing programs featuring African American themes or content.
While the NMAAHC helps to highlight the overall black experience in America, the contributions of regional museums to the national storytelling effort of African American history cannot be understated. “Museums are more than just about objects, museums are gathering places,” says the Wright Museum’s LaNesha DeBardelaben, Sr. VP of Education & Exhibits.
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Docents Set the Tone of the Tour

We continue to be faced with our past, and sadly create new stories in our present, filled with atrocities, bad actors, heartbreaking events and shameful issues – some bound to repeat themselves in the future unless we make purposeful efforts to face them. As we engage the public, we must be mindful of how to address those tough topics with a sense of dignity. This presents opportunities not only to educate, dispel myths, and validate history, but, to turn difficult topics into thoughtful tours that engage and enlighten visitors.

- Share the Facts * HISTORY IS HISTORY * WE CAN’T TAKE IT BACK!
- Tell the Truth with Compassion
  - Keep It Simple, Especially for Children & Youth
- Prepare for:
  - Apology * Denial * Ignorance * Resistance * Rudeness * Shame * Shock
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Effective Methods for Approaching Tough Topics:

- The Use of Design & Space
- Highlighting Objects & Storytelling
- The Use of Language within the Exhibits/By Docents
- The Use of Self
- Knowing Your Audience(s)

“HUMANITY TRANSCENDS RACE & COLOR”
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The Use of Design & Space:

- How does the museum’s design/shape evoke thought?
- Where are reflective spaces located within the museum that create empathy?
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The Use of Design & Space:
To put into perspective some of these hard hitting truths, I introduce these two thoughts for visitors at the beginning of my “storytelling” in the HISTORY GALLERIES TOUR at the NMAAHC (Two Things to Remember When Touring These Galleries)

▶ What Makes You Wanna Holla?!
▶ What Brings You Joy?!
Our history begins at HUMANITY, not slavery. Dispelling the myth that Africans and African Americans have always been enslaved. That is not where our history begins.
About 9 to 15 million Africans went on the voyage:

- 3 to 5 million perished before they even reached the Americas
- “If the Atlantic were to dry up it would reveal a scattered pathway of human bones marking the various routes of the MIDDLE PASSAGE.”
Olada Equiano: "I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; I was soon put down under the decks, and there, I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, Death, to relieve me . . ."
Making A Way Out of No Way: Despite the inhumane treatment of Africans/African American men, women and children by other human beings; being bought and sold as property; HUMANITY and AGENCY were maintained. Love and family was sacred; individuals risked their lives to make a HOME and a WAY IN LIFE.
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Objects & Storytelling: Racism, Stereotypes and Propaganda

These images served a common purpose—to justify the mistreatment of African Americans and the logic of segregation.
The Purpose of Stereotypes

In the late 1800s and well into the 1900s, racist images were common on everyday items such as toys, salt-and-pepper shakers, advertisements, and household figurines. The images served a common purpose—to justify the mistreatment of African Americans and the logic of segregation. They depicted African Americans as slow-witted, lazy, and untrustworthy, but still loveable and childlike souls who simply needed the oversight of white people to ensure that they did no harm to themselves or others.
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Objects & Storytelling: Innocence and Integration
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Objects & Storytelling: Segregation & Policing
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Objects & Storytelling: Mobility and the Movement
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Objects & Storytelling: *Pride and the Use of Your Platform*
Through our exhibits and through our tours, we provide a sense of dignity in the language that we use and the stories we tell. Black history does not begin with slavery! The Slavery and Freedom exhibition starts the story with this fact. Acts of resistance, terminology such as – “enslaved” versus “slaves,” protest, music, military services, women's empowerment, and political stories, are all vehicles of empowerment.

Exhibit and Gallery titles, as well as quotes throughout the museum are evidence of this empowering use of language.
“Our history begins at HUMANITY, not slavery.”

“The use of the word ENSLAVED, and NOT slavery.”
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The Use of Self:

- Develop authentic, compassionate tour strategies that incorporate your personal style.
- Engage visitors with thoughtful, thought-provoking questions.
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Knowing Your Audience(s):

- Where do visitors call home/Where are they visiting from?
  - What part of the US
  - What part of the world
- What are their ethnic backgrounds?
- How much time do they have to explore the museum?
- What do they want to see/what have they heard about?
- How do they react?
Final Thoughts:

- Enhance your own knowledge
- Take docent-led tours of other museums with sensitive subject matter (examples below):
  - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (WDC); Yad Vashem-The World Holocaust Remembrance Center (Israel); The National September 11 Memorial & Museum (NYC); National Museum of the American Indian (WDC); The National Lynching Museum (AL)
- Engage with others who don’t look like you to learn about their culture, history and experiences.

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Q & A

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