

The background features a large, stylized yellow sun in the upper right corner. A dark teal path winds from the bottom center towards the right. On the left side, there is a dark brown brick wall with a grid pattern, partially obscured by a dark blue horizontal band. The overall color palette consists of warm earth tones and deep blues.

THE STONY ROAD PILGRIMAGE

The National Museum of African American History and Culture
as a Site of Spiritual Pilgrimage

By Micky ScottBey Jones

THE STONY ROAD PILGRIMAGE



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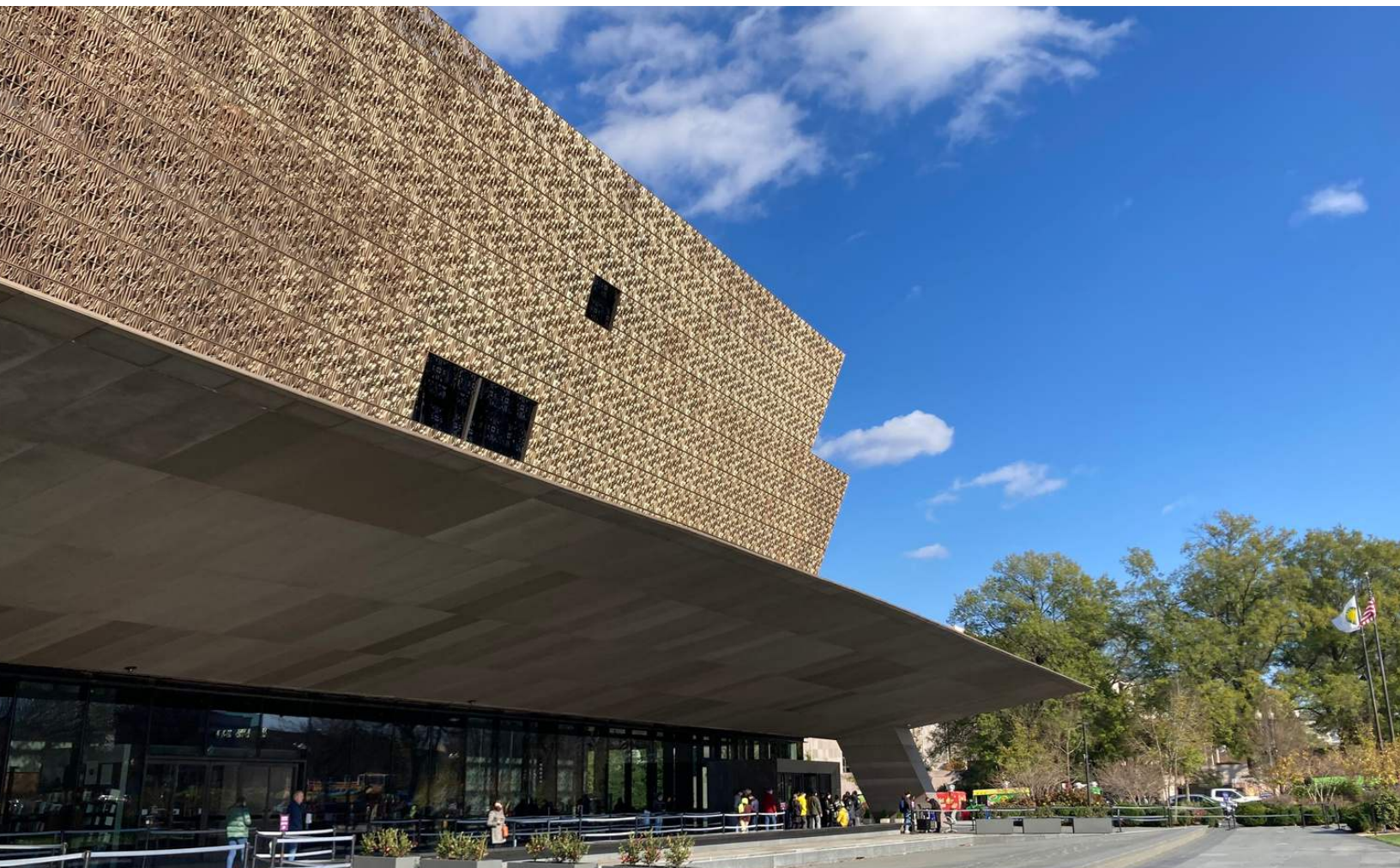
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INTRODUCTION

“Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” [2]

~ CHINUA ACHEBE

IT’S TIME FOR THE LION TO TELL THE STORY. IT IS TIME TO TELL A MORE COMPLETE STORY, WHERE THE HUNTER’S STORY CANNOT BE TOLD WITHOUT THE TRUTH OF THE LION’S STORY.

One of the things that struck me on my first visit to the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) was how the story was being told. The history galleries, where our journey will take place, tells 600 years of history, starting with the peoples[3] that the 600 years are about. The story doesn’t start with the peoples[4] who would later impact them with colonization and brutality.

This story starts with African peoples. Peoples who inhabited the continent we now call Africa had vibrant cultures that included everything that makes societies survive and thrive.

They had established lives: including communities, religions, governments, commerce, trade, language, art, education, and agriculture full of complexity and depth—long before chattel slavery, colonization, and large-scale cross-continental trade.

The story of what happened after those lives were disrupted has largely been told by the colonizers—those who “discovered” and enslaved them—that is, it has been told by the hunter, not the lion. But now, the lions are able to tell their stories, starting with their own definition of who they were and how that has influenced who they’ve become.

[2] “The Art of Fiction No. 139,” *The Paris Review* (November 9, 2020); <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1720/the-art-of-fiction-no-139-chinua-achebe>

[3] I use the term “peoples” here, instead of people, because in this case people would refer to those from a single country, community, or ethnicity. The peoples of Africa have often been referred to as one racialized category but actually come from a multitude of ethnic groups, nation-states, kingdoms, and tribes. I use the term peoples to honor those distinctions despite the deliberate and systematic attempt to erase and condense these groups in order to reduce them into one racialized category based on skin color. Shifting our language is one way to dismantle white supremacy and racialized categories, both individually and culturally, in a practical way.

[4] Again, peoples is used here to denote the fact that European peoples of multiple nation-states, kingdoms, and ethnicities participated in race-based chattel slavery, imperialism, and colonialism that negatively and violently impacted African peoples.

The National Museum of African American History in Washington, D.C., is a powerful example of lions finally free to roar their own narratives. After more than a century of planning, fighting, politicking, and struggle, African Americans have a national[5] museum that tells all Americans and visitors from around the world the truth about our often distorted history and fragmented collective memory.

One can approach a visit to the NMAAHC in many ways. The building itself is an architectural masterpiece. Every detail—inside and out—points to the beauty and resilience of African Americans. For example, the trees just outside the museum are live oaks, trees native to the Southeastern coast of the United States and the “deep South,” the home of many of our enslaved African ancestors and still the largest concentration of their descendants.[6] These tall, sturdy trees stay evergreen throughout the year, making the live oak a place of respite from sun and rain, a place to gather no matter the season.[7] The bronze-coated aluminum lattice that covers the outside of the museum is a nod to the artisans of South Carolina (who later dispersed to Louisiana as well), Black people whose skill and artistry adorned this land before it was called the United States of America.

This may be even more poignant, because it is the legacy of nearly all African Americans, as around 80% of those who can trace their ancestry through enslaved African people entered this continent through South Carolina’s slave ports.

Even if you were to simply wander through the exhibits with no agenda or preparation, you would still have a meaningful experience walking through 400+ years of artifacts, photographs, stories, and videos of African American resistance, resilience, and triumph. Anyone with a beating heart would be moved in mind, body and spirit.

America is often described as a country of immigrants. That romanticized story leaves out the foundational building blocks of genocide of Indigenous people and chattel slavery of Black African peoples who are the ancestors of African American people. From the earliest laws established in the United States, faith communities, education systems, businesses, neighborhoods, and more were regulated by the artificial, nebulous yet rigid construct of race and racial difference.

Race—and particularly the place of Black/African American people—has been foundational to American culture, politics, and social and religious life.

[5] According to <https://blackmuseums.org/>, the U.S. has over 90 Black/African American local museums and over 300 related sites. The NMAAHC is the first national museum of its kind and is connected to the Smithsonian Institution and therefore free for all visitors.

[6] Moslimani, M. (2023, March 2). Facts about the U.S. Black population. Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/fact-sheet/facts-about-the-us-black-population/>

[7] Smithsonian institute marker, outside of the NMAAHC, 2022.

What are the gifts of our ancestors? What are the lessons and cautionary tales? Understanding the many streams that make up the river that is American history is a work of learning and unlearning, questioning and reinterpreting.

We are invited to the possibility of revelation, repentance, and perhaps redemption. It is a quest—a pilgrimage. In order to lament and celebrate the past, in order to understand the uniqueness of particular people and places and the repeated refrains of this present moment that allow us to work toward a more just and redeemed future, we must explore the narratives of African Americans—narratives that are integral to the story but often ignored or dismissed as side characters in our national story.

This pilgrimage invites participants to explore the history, faith, and lives of African Americans, to make connections to the current spiritual and socio-political moment, and to discuss how that impacts our responsibilities and possibilities for the dream of Beloved Community.[8]

“If we are going to build a multiracial society, which is our only hope, then one has got to accept that I have learned a lot from you and a lot of it is bitter, but you have a lot to learn from me and a lot of that will be bitter. That bitterness is our only hope. That is the only way we get past it...it is our common history. My history is also yours.”[9]

~ JAMES BALDWIN

How to Use This Guide

You might think of this guide as part docent and part sherpa—a personal, knowledgeable guide through a site of collective history and sacred memory. There is currently no audio program or steady stream of docents to lead people through the museum. Like many Smithsonian sites, the NMAAHC has thousands of items on display and is often packed with visitors. This guide offers you a way to focus, pace yourself, and experience the museum in a way that connects to your life and other learning in meaningful ways that will have a lasting impact.

Before you arrive

I suggest that you read through the entire guide before your visit. This is akin to reading a guidebook before showing up in Spain to hike the Camino: You can just show up and start hiking, but you’ll get more out of the experience if you know a few logistics and do some spiritual preparation before your first step.

This introduction, along with the next two sections, offer important logistical information and reflection points to orient you. Review the pilgrimage guide section (page 11) as well for specific information that may make things easier on a practical level, like restroom locations, food options, and accessibility tips. This is especially important if you are a group leader and will be caring for others during your visit.

[8] Beloved Community Speech, MLK given in 1956; https://nyscu.org/AM_brochures/MLK1956_text.pdf

[9] Zimmerman, J. (2020, October 11). Perspective | Ethnic Studies Can’t Make Up for Whitewashed History in Classrooms. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/10/11/ethnic-studies-cant-make-up-whitewashed-history-classrooms/?fbclid=IwAR1_HOO07KVvTr-HnsqK-onNlpJsxOCPvSu7JaGoMd1keZBVDjO_sMkII_E

WHAT IS PILGRIMAGE?

Pilgrimage is a contemplative spiritual practice. The practice is not bound to one spiritual or religious tradition but is a well-respected and vital practice for many. For Christians, especially Protestant Christians, pilgrimage has become a less prominent practice in recent centuries, but some specific routes remain popular. But it isn't the distance, expense, exoticness, or holiness of the location that makes it a spiritual practice. A journey of movement from start point to end point becomes a pilgrimage whenever you set aside specific time, fix your attention on the journey, and set out to return different from when you began. Whether a trip to a historical or religious site the next town over, to a natural wonder across the globe, or through a labyrinth, a pilgrimage is a time set apart for deep spiritual reflection, for challenge to long-held beliefs, for the blessing of new relationships, and for examination of what you know and love. A pilgrimage does not promise epiphanies but makes space for the possibility of "numinous moments"—moments of illumination and decision, when you are forever changed and committed to more of something—more love, more justice, more peace—to co-create a world in which we can all experience more liberation and mutual flourishing.

As we journey together, we also journey alone—pilgrimage amplifies this reality of life. Your life journey is fully experienced by you alone, but you are never fully alone. Upon birth, you step into a stream of narratives flowing with ancestors, family, community members, peers and the possibility of those that will come after you. Pilgrimage helps you become more deeply in touch with that reality.

Why approach the NMAAHC as a pilgrimage?

This pilgrimage invites participants to explore the history, faith, and lives of African Americans, make connections to their own faith and history and the current spiritual and socio-political moment. The guide with reflection questions and additional information equips you to discuss how all of that impacts our responsibilities, challenges, gifts, and possibilities for the dream of Beloved Community and a more justice-rooted practice of Christian love.

Elements of the NMAAHC building's design lends to it being a place of deep contemplation. The three lower floors, known as the history galleries, where our pilgrimage takes place, are connected by a series of ramps. Moving visitors in a spiral journey through time, from the 1400s in the lowest level up to the present in the upper level, the design reminds me of walking a labyrinth. Like many spiritual practices, the origins of labyrinths aren't fully known, and what is known points back to many places and many traditions from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Asia. The greatest link to Christian traditions is how labyrinth walking became a substitute for pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the Middle Ages and has continued as a spiritual practice at retreat centers, monasteries, and other places of deeply contemplative practice.[17]

[17] Algeo, John. "The Labyrinth: A Brief Introduction to its History, Meaning and Use." *Quest* 89.1 (January–February 2001): 24–25.

THE ENCOUNTER

STOPS AND QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Pilgrimage stops are offered as a way to help you pause, reflect, breathe, and synthesize some of the information and experiences you are having. Of course, you can stop and reflect at any point. If you have the ability to take notes, at each “stop” you can jot down your thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, prayers, questions, and anything else that comes up for you. You may also want to pause at each stop in order to pace and to walk with intention.

Concourse Level: Entrance to History Galleries—Journey Toward Freedom

AS YOU BEGIN, TAKE A DEEP BREATH. CENTER YOURSELF.
LOOK AT THE WALL OF PICTURES BEFORE ENTERING THE ELEVATOR.

In the entrance area for the history galleries, which you can enter via stairs or elevator, notice the pictures of the people floor to ceiling on the wall. Is there someone who reminds you of yourself? Is there a smile that feels familiar? Is there a face that reminds you of someone you love? Where is your story in this journey?

YOU WILL TAKE THE ELEVATOR OR STAIRS DOWN TO THE LOWEST LEVEL.

C3 (Lowest Level): 1400-1877—Beginning of the Labyrinth—Slavery and Freedom

As you enter the beginning of your winding journey, take a moment for some focused observation of your surroundings and yourself. Upon first entering the space from the elevator or stairs, consider the sounds and lighting. What do you notice? Check in with how you feel in your body. What do you notice? Take a deep breath and begin your journey.

- ❑ **Meet Queen Nzingha.** Stand before the queen who greets you at the beginning of this journey. What does she have to tell you? A popular myth purports that Africans participated in the slave trade out of greed. What else might have influenced their participation?

- ❑ **Sao Jose-Paquete de Africa.** (You may have to wait to enter this area—please walk through in silence). This exhibit room tells the story of a Portuguese slave ship wrecked off the coast of South Africa in 1794—remains of and exhibits of this ship can be found here and in the Slave Lodge Museum[23] in Cape Town South Africa. See the timber, ballasts (weights), and shackles recovered from the ship. Consider the men, women, and children affected on both sides of the ocean that this ship represents. What is the spiritual residue of shackling other human beings? What is the spiritual residue of being transported with shackles around your hands and feet?

[23] <https://www.iziko.org.za/exhibitions/the-journeys-of-the-sao-jose/>

