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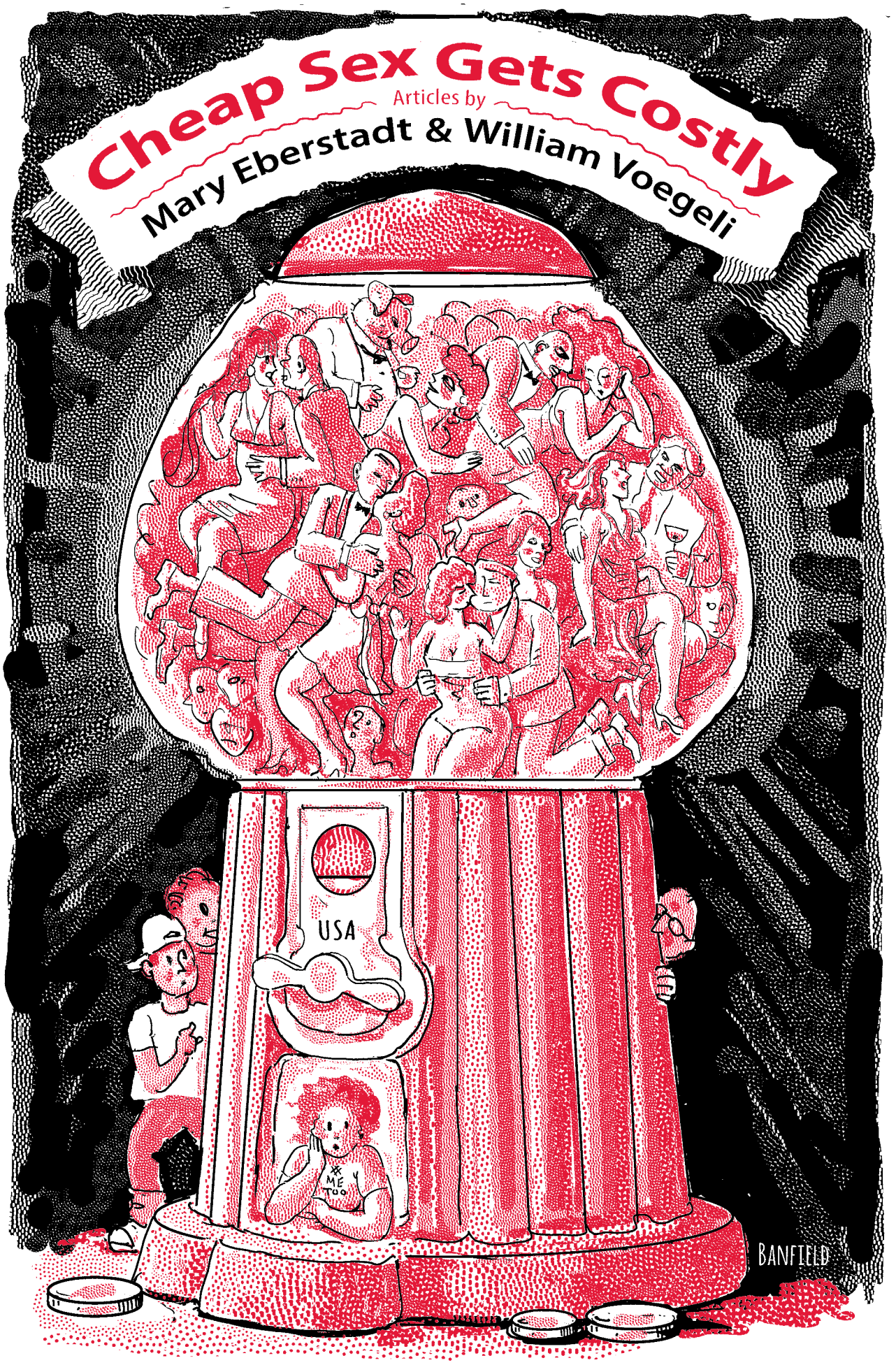

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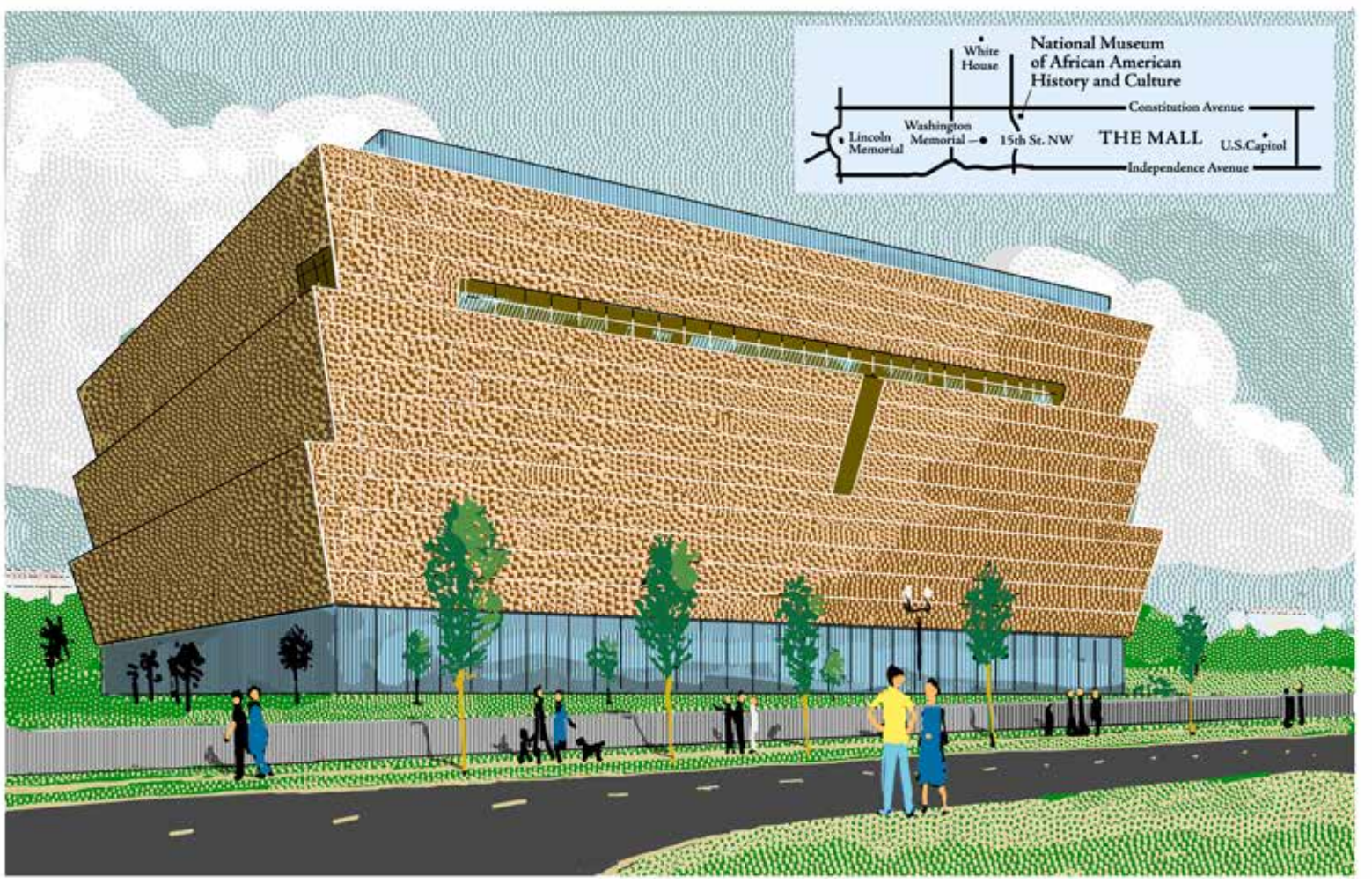
Essay by Brian Allen

The Smithsonian's New Gem



Obsession with race has demeaned our colleges, hijacked our political culture, and become a fundraising industry. After this exhausting, depressing experience and amid a climate of racial acrimony, it is an inspiration to spend time at the Smithsonian's new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. It's a splendid place, like a small, vibrant university. The museum's curators have conceived a thoughtful, riveting presentation of American history. African-American history is bound up with broader American history for the simple reason that black and white Americans have more in common with each other than either has with anyone else on earth. Our country's history has as many stories as it has people, and the stories of black people have too often been ignored. At the new museum, visitors will find reasons to cry, laugh, sing, dance, rage, reflect, and repent. On my two visits—one during a holiday weekend—I saw lots of families, and lots of Washingtonians meeting out-of-town company. The place belongs on every itinerary to the capital, and deserves to become an intellectual beacon.

All-American History

A word of warning: the building is immense, with hundreds of objects and vignettes. Its scale has generated some criticism that it's an encyclopedic rather than a thematic museum. The quick analogy I would make is to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. No one has the steam to cover all of it in one day without a deadening sense of exhaustion—which would be a shame since almost all of its parts are superb. During a visit, it's best to focus on a few of the big sections based on personal preferences or goals. I was drawn to the early history of African slavery and, later, to a gallery on the military service of African Americans. I chose the first because I wanted to see whether this truly dreadful period was slathered with resentment, or crassly exploited to produce guilt. It was neither. It makes clear that slavery wasn't invented in America. Humanity has lived for thousands of years on a diet that includes brutality. But visitors see, too, the resilience of African culture, and its adoption into the new American culture. That said, in this section I thought often of the Holocaust. The differences are enormous but cruelty and exploitation are staples of both, and they're conveyed with a powerful ring of truth. This part of the museum is not shy about the mechanics of enslavement, the bureaucracy of it, or the physical instruments of bondage, all of which are awful to see.

Slavery was among the threads that ran through most aspects of the western hemisphere's early exploration and development. Slavery's influence extended far beyond Southern sugar, tobacco, and cotton farms to textile mills in New England, banks in New York, and the settlement of the American frontier from the Appalachian Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. Black slavery made everyday life easier

for millions of Americans. One of its foundations was the sophisticated system of black-on-black slavery that had existed for centuries in Africa, and of course there were a few black slaveowners in the U.S., too. At the same time, some American Indians owned black slaves, and many tribes supported the Confederacy.

There are two things that are clear in the gallery on military service. One is the story of African-American heroism and sacrifice in every phase of our history, ungrudgingly made on behalf of principles for whose enjoyment they often had been at least partially excluded. More people need to know this story, and the men and women involved. Another is the patience, fortitude, and dignity black soldiers displayed under the heel of a military brass that marginalized their service. In treating the Civil War, for example, the curators explore many big and small issues. How, for example, did it evolve from a war over keeping the Union intact to a war contesting the future of slavery? Then they drill down into specific stories, including how the Union army treated the many thousands of African-American soldiers in its ranks.

Unless you're comatose, you can't leave the gallery on African-American music unfazed. It's glorious. In this very big space, we understand again that African-American history is American history, not a separate or parallel story but as mixed and inseparable as the blood of generations in a new baby. Another essential stop is the section on the 1960s civil rights movement. It's the story of our time. The two themes sometimes intersect and reinforce each other beautifully. One video shows the magnificent Mahalia Jackson singing the hymn "His Eye Is on the Sparrow" at the 1963 civil rights march at which Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. At the end of the song, King rises to speak. Mahalia prods him, "tell us about the dream, Martin, tell us about the dream." It's among the most moving moments and a triumph of earnest, gentle reason and beauty over the screaming and name-calling we hear today.

Nevertheless, there are some omissions and false steps. Until the election of Barack Obama, Justice Clarence Thomas was the most prominent and powerful African American in national government. Yet at the new museum he's ignored except as a prop for Anita Hill, his tiresome one-time accuser. Among the most arresting moments in my lifetime wasn't her testimony at his confirmation hearing but Thomas's. There, the beleaguered nominee looked defiantly at the smug, bloated Alabama Senator Howell Heflin and blasted the hearing as "a high-tech lynching." Thomas's one line expressed so many of the tangles of African-American history. His inspirational story is one shared by hundreds of thousands of black Americans: he rose from rural poverty in the South; championed by a stern, fiercely religious grandmother; and labored through years at Yale when Ivy League racism was out in the open. As a proud Republican and conservative, Thomas embodies a counter-narrative that needed to be treated in full and not hijacked by Hill.

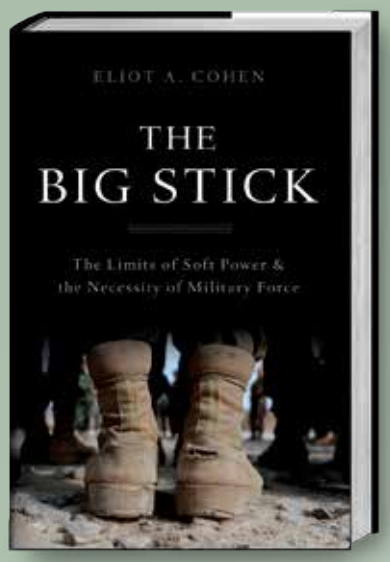
Black Lives Matter gets more attention in the museum than it should. Meanwhile, a plague of black-on-black violence in our cities consumes thousands of young lives, AIDS in black America is a poignant tale, and the increasing failure of black fatherhood as an institution is a major cultural affliction affecting millions. Each of these stories deserves more attention.

The Building

Although overall it is a great success and a distinguished addition to the Mall, the building itself was ill-served by the trustees' decision to switch the exterior cladding from bronze to painted aluminum to save money. The dull, prosaic aluminum lacks poetic beauty and undermines the good contrast between its glistening, pierced surface and the white or buff stone of the surrounding buildings, especially the nearby Washington Monument. The museum's three inverted tiers evoke design elements indigenous to Nigeria's Yoruba people, while its filigreed panels reference bronze and iron grillwork in which black craftsmen specialized in antebellum Louisiana. It's an attractive look, though bronze would not only have aged more beautifully but also given the piercings a vitality that painted aluminum doesn't entirely have.

Clearly the building's planners underestimated the museum's popularity. On my visits the place was packed—a satisfying measure of success—and the spacious, largely open first floor accommodates crowds comfortably. Once inside the building, however, visitors usually travel by elevator to the lower level, where the permanent exhibits start. I'm not fond of museums that place significant distance between the entrance and the exhibitions. Just begin the story, please. We all travelled far enough to get here; don't make us travel further.

What's more, visitors enter narrow underground galleries. The effect is one of feeling trapped. The design might have been a deliberate reference to the conditions on the slave ships in which hundreds of thousands of miserable African men and women came



BASIC GOES TO **WAR**

"A balanced and sensitive analysis of America's military record since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.... Mr. Cohen's lucid book is a must-read for anyone interested in military might—and how it can help us maintain the edge we need in this treacherous age."

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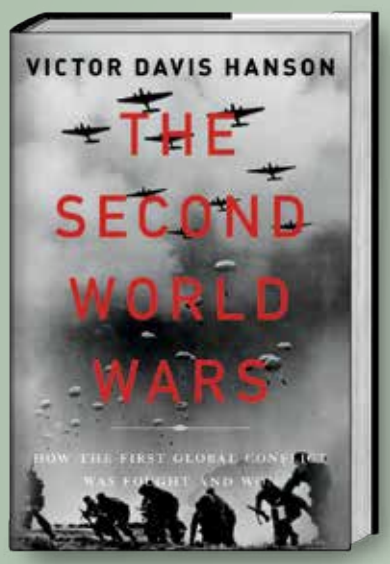

"If you think there is nothing more to be said about World War II, then you haven't read Victor Davis Hanson's *The Second World Wars*.... Page after page, he produces dazzling insights informed by his deep knowledge of military history going all the way back to ancient Greece. *The Second World Wars* is compulsively readable."

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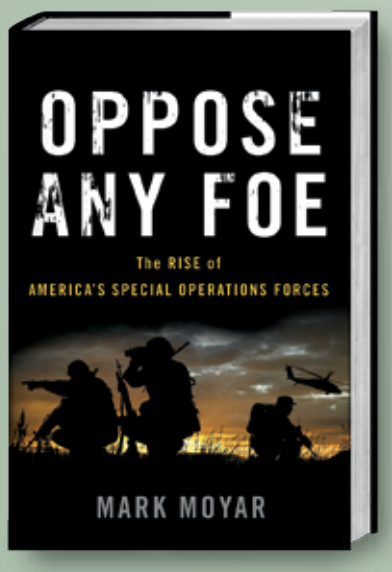

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here. Still, underground exhibition space is usually depressing in several ways, and here it detracts from the museum's otherwise, compelling narrative.

On the fourth floor is a gallery showing work by African-American artists. It is a welcome space for contemplation after the buoyant music galleries on the third floor. I would suggest more spaces like this. Over time, the curators will want real estate for serious scholarly shows. The expansive gallery on the first floor provides a good space for such shows. When I went it was devoted to the "Power of Place," a superb exhibition of photographs with lots of images and lots of text. Less of both, at least in this space, would mean more, both in terms of message and learning. As beautifully designed and installed as the museum is—and I am a new, enthusiastic fan—with each object intelligently interpreted, the overall effect is *a lot to absorb*. The inaugural displays' excellent design and production values are sometimes so expertly crafted that they overwhelm the objects being presented, and steal the focus. Over time, because the exhibits are so tech heavy, they will be redone as new technology develops. I hope some things rotate, while spaces refresh and get simpler.

A Worthy Cause

Having been a museum director and curator, I can see that the museum is going to be a very expensive proposition in the years ahead. It has the potential to become an intellectual powerhouse, but this takes money. It is already a community center and a tourist attraction, which is the direction many of the Smithsonian museums take. But good attendance, as nice as it is, is not the best measure of success. The educational component is more important.

Consider the kind of serious, nuanced shows the museum could mount. Perhaps an exploration of modern-day slavery, which thrives all over the world, including even in the United States (as underground sex trafficking). Or the story of slavery on our Ivy League campuses, which thrived long into the 19th century, with many professors in New Haven, Cambridge, and Princeton owning slaves. There were lots of false starts in the abolitionist movement and critical moments before the Civil War bloodbath when America came close to mustering the will to return slavery to the course of ultimate extinction, as Abraham Lincoln put it. Critical failures of leadership, unlucky distractions, and the powerful pull of habit and convenience made these missed moments.

The country also needs a central hub to promote the hundreds of small African-American historical societies, and other small museums focused on black history, predominantly located in the South. They have little in the way of a donor base or marketing power but own archives and have the capacity to tell compelling stories focused on local figures. They could use a national advocate like this prominent new Smithsonian institution.

"Once a museum director, always a fundraiser" is among my mantras. I hope the museum develops a strong private fundraising base and an endowment big enough to give it the necessary freedom in its programming. It often happens that after the initial celebration fades, new museums face a fiscal hangover. Lots of people will come for the novelty of seeing the place, but only great programming will make for repeat visitors and passionate donors. Cutting back on creative potential in order to save money is a losing bet in the long term.

Lonnie Bunch, the new museum's founding director, clearly possesses the vision, tenacity, and massive powers of persuasion needed in order to conceive and oversee such a project, and to build it into a marquee facility. It's not only a new institution; it's a new and worthy cause, putting so many aspects of our history front and center and nudging us as citizens to see our shared history in a new way. The National Museum of African American History and Culture delivers the forgiveness, unity, and hope America's first black president never did, alas.

Brian Allen directed the museum division of the New-York Historical Society (2013–2015) and the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, in Andover, MA (2004–2013). He was the curator of American art at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, MA (1996–2004).