

THE NEED FOR INTEGRATED METHODOLOGY – THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

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Abstract: For semiotically complex topics of investigation, such as museums, the need arises for an integrated analytical approach that enables the researcher to study the relationship between its different components and their possible social significance. The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), on the National Mall in Washington (DC), next to the Washington Monument, which marks the culmination of decades of efforts and struggles to commemorate African American history, is a case in point. A major representational objective of the museum is to rescue generations of black people from anonymity by showing how ingenious and resilient the people who endured slavery were, and how optimism, hope and spirituality – the typical US values – define African American culture as well. In order to investigate the interplay and evaluate the synergy of the multi-layered communicative dimensions of the NMAAHC, which is the major objective of this observational study, an integrated methodological approach was required. The resources of multimodal discourse analysis were thus integrated with the fine-grained tools of the Appraisal Framework for the verbal components, and with insights from museum studies. The socio-cognitive implications of the data of these observational analyses were discussed in the light of the relatively recent and ongoing efforts to reconsider USA history through the lens of the African American experience.

Keywords: integrated methodology; museum studies; multimodal racial literacies, appraisal framework.

¹ The authors discussed and conceived this study together. In particular, Lucia Abbamonte is responsible for Sections 1, 3, and Raffaella Antinucci for Sections 2, 4.

What can be studied is always a relationship or an infinite regress of relationships. Never a “thing”
(Gregory Bateson 1978: 249)

For me, it's great when people feel themselves looking at themselves
(Steven Rodney McQueen, in Haynes 2020)

1. Introduction and aims

When the topic of the investigation is as semiotically complex as a museum, the need arises for an integrated approach that enables the researcher to study the relationship between its different components and their possible social significance. Museums are no longer considered as places where objects or artworks are collected and exhibited, but, increasingly, as loci of interaction where knowledge is socially co-constructed – public engagement emerged as a key notion in this paradigm shift (Anderson 2004). In Sabatini's words, “museums should be critically approached as knowledge sites where, besides artifacts and artwork, verbal and visual language are on display, constructing specific socio-cultural mind-frames and construing community involvement” (Sabatini 2016:105).

The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) is a case in point. The winding path towards representation, acknowledgement and visibility for African American people in the US reached both a literal and an iconic landmark with the long-awaited construction of the NMAAHC on the National Mall in Washington, DC, an outstanding site of memory and the first “green building” on the Mall.

The newest of the Smithsonian museums, the NMAAHC, which opened on September 24, 2016, with a grand dedication ceremony opened by President Obama, had been established by law in 2003, the culmination of decades of efforts and struggles (since 1915) to commemorate African American history. Among the salient moments of this long itinerary, on 4 March 1929, despite significant racially charged opposition, President Calvin Coolidge signed a law creating a commission for the museum. Later, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, galvanized interest again. A decisive step came in 2005 when Lonnie G. Bunch III was appointed Founding Director of the museum. The prestigious historian and educator had neither resources nor funds to rely on, only his strong commitment to build “a place that would make America better [... by] shaping the perspective of a nation [whose] history is the Gordian knot of race relations” (Smithsonian n.d.). Apparently, this was sufficient to kickstart the process and to attract and gather the necessary funding. Congressional funding provided half of the (under)estimated \$500 million needed, and \$315 million was raised by private funding. Significant donors ranged from Robert F. Smith (CEO of Vista Equity Partners) and Oprah Winfrey (the museum's theatre was named after her) to David Rubenstein, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the sports star

Michael Jordan, Walmart, Boeing, the Alfred Street Baptist Church of Alexandria, and Microsoft². Given its educational and proactive corporate identity, the NMAAHC has continued to attract numerous contributions, both from motivated supporters (e.g. former NBA player Kevin Johnson) and its expanding membership programme, as well as from institutions. Among others, 21st Century Fox and the PwC Charitable Foundation in 2017 funded the Digital Education Initiative, which will make the museum's research-based curricula available to educators worldwide³, an initiative that appears particularly timely in our (post-)Covid era.

The convergence of participation and efforts of Americans from all walks of life to support the NMAAHC was focused on promoting change by remembering and visualizing the (challenging) history and stories through artefacts, instruction and arts. Seemingly, the success of the NMAAHC, which has surpassed six million visits, has accelerated the movement in favour of representing other minorities, with the approval in 2020 of the projects of the National Museum of the American Latino and the National Museum of Women's History, both to be created on the National Mall. These are projects that are still generating controversies, based on the (debatable) objection that they "would further divide the country, and that the history of Latinos and women should be part of existing Smithsonian museums" (Bahr 2020).

A major representational objective of the NMAAHC is to rescue generations of black people from anonymity by showing how ingenious and resilient the people who endured slavery were and how optimism, hope and spirituality – the typical US values – define African American culture as well. In the museum, African Americans are represented as not only the victims of slavery but, most importantly, as resourceful human beings, both through the exhibition of artefacts (ca. 40,000) and various kinds of multimodal narratives as well as a variety of interactive exhibitions displayed in a symbolically charged architectural structure (nearly 400,000 square feet).

Instead of sadness, the Tanzanian-born British architect David Adjaye, the museum's lead designer (of the Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup, selected in 2009), saw celebration. Adjaye wanted to represent the African-American story as "an extraordinary journey of overcoming, and shaping, what America is" – through the NMAAHC's "spatial narrative" (Byrd 2016). In particular, the museum's façade, the "corona", takes a three-tiered upward-thrusting inverted pyramid shape, inspired by the Yoruban Caryatid⁴, which Rep. John Lewis, at

² See, among others, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/about/founding-donors>; <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/national-museum-african-american-history-and-culture-receives-20-million-gift-robert-f-smit>.

³ Given its strong socio-educational orientation, the museum generally adopts an open access policy. This is declared, for example, on its Open Access page: "Welcome to Smithsonian Open Access, where you can download, share, and reuse millions of the Smithsonian's images – right now, without asking. With new platforms and tools, you have easier access to more than 3 million 2D and 3D digital items from our collections – with many more to come. This includes images and data from across the Smithsonian's 19 museums, nine research centers, libraries, archives, and the National Zoo".

⁴ Typically, a caryatid is a stone sculpture of a draped female figure, used as a pillar to support the entablature of a Greek or Greek-style building. In Yoruba art, the caryatid may be a female

the Grand Opening, defined as “the story of our lives wrapped in a beautiful golden crown of grace.”

The all-encompassing vision was to mirror the rise of African Americans in the US, which both the architectural structure of the museum and the artefact displays have synergically embodied (see section 3.1). The inaugural and temporary exhibitions have engaged the visitors in this educational experience and have contributed to lengthening the time visitors spend in the museum⁵.

The museum’s attitude is in line with the relatively recent developments in school curricula aimed at giving visibility to African and African American history⁶, which it highlights. Indeed, the museum’s Education Department provides cooperative workshops with teachers to develop students’ racial literacies. Programmes relying on digital resources (such as “Let’s Talk!” or “Morning at the Museum” for children with disabilities) facilitate the process, as the museum aims to develop a technologically-enhanced learning environment.

In the NMAAHC’s galleries, artefacts and iconic objects pertaining to sports, music, visual arts, hair and style are variously displayed and enhanced through advanced interactive 3D models of objects from the collection.

A distinguishing feature of the NMAAHC is its multimodal interactivity with both the museumgoers and the citizens. At a verbal level, apart from the texts accompanying the artefacts, the books as artefacts (see 3.2.1.), and the denomination of the galleries, which help create narrative constructions, the museum’s multimedia (technology-enhanced resources) enable the visitors to record their considerations. In dedicated reflection booths, visitors can express the impact of their learning experience during their visit and tell their personal memories of slavery or racial discrimination, and some of them do so by telling their stories in a highly affectual language, which will be a major focus of this investigation. In particular, through the Visitor Voices campaign, visitors are empowered to verbalize their identity issues and see themselves as part of the NMAAHC’s history in progress, which is amplified through (social) media and YouTube.

Investigating the interplay of the rich, multi-layered communicative dimensions of the NMAAHC is the aim of this observational study, as well as accounting for aspects of the museum’s societal/pedagogical aims, in the light of the relatively recent and ongoing efforts (e.g. Black History Month in schools) to reconsider US history through the lens of the African American experience. Such interconnected topics are also an example of how necessary an integrated analytical approach can be.

figure, kneeling or sitting on a mortar, holding a large bowl with a lid above her head with both hands, or a traditional wooden column with a crown at its top.

⁵ About the time spent in the museum, see the museum’s website and also: <https://www.npr.org/2016/11/03/500560162/new-smithsonian-african-american-history-museum-overwhelmed-with-visitors>.

⁶ The museum also invites living heroes to tell their instructive and moving stories to the audiences, e.g. the Tuskegee Airmen, who distinguished themselves during World War II in the US Army Air Corps, but who faced racism as the nation’s first black aviators. African American “sheroes” are also remembered, such as through the #HiddenHerstory social media campaign, one of the many awareness-raising campaigns promoted by the museum.

2. *Integrated methodology*

To investigate the synergy and meaning of the interactive multi-faceted communicative layers of the NMAAHC, an integrated methodological approach is required. Notions from both semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) need to be taken into account, as well as from verbal discourse analysis studies, such as a resource from systemic functional linguistics (SFL), namely, the appraisal framework. “Museum studies” and “museum discourse” are increasingly common and concise denominations for this syncretic branch of multimodal discourse studies. More specifically, we:

- investigated how the distinctive architecture of the NMAAHC helps to frame the institution and magnify its stated purposes, in the light of edusemiotics and museum studies;

- observed and commented on how the navigation path for visitors unfolds in a multi-layered immersive semiotic environment, where the audio-visuals surrounding the artefacts create a rich learning landscape in synergy with the verbal texts and books (in light of edusemiotics, MDA and museum studies);

- transcribed and analysed, utilising the Appraisal Framework, the texts of seven “Visitor Voices” speeches out of the 12 included on the NMAAHC’s dedicated webpage in 2017 to celebrate the museum’s first anniversary: the speeches recounted the visitors’ personal experiences or stories and their reflections on the exhibitions.

2.1. Edusemiotics and museum texts

From a semiotic perspective, “human survival is taken to depend upon a continuous process of meaning-making” (Gough and Stables 2012: 369), which requires adequate recognition in the teaching-learning process. In 2010, Marcel Danesi coined the neologism “edusemiotics”. Through edusemiotics, which was also inspired by the thought of Charles Sanders Peirce⁷, learning could be liberated from the specific domain of education (Olteanu and Campbell 2017, 2018), and from the primacy of the book, in favour of “a more ecologically and biologically minded approach to education that resists separating humans from animals, culture from nature, recognizing that because learning is continuous, occurring in every life form [...], any Umwelt has educational potential” (Olteanu 2016: 586).

Concisely, we can say that the living/learning process can be seen as a semiotic engagement, where edusemiotics raises awareness of the embodied foundation of the continuity of human learning. Such notions seem appropriate to convey the educational potential and realizations of the NMAAHC, which explicitly provides such a comprehensive Umwelt (organizational/learning landscape).

⁷ As Peirce would say, people are also signs, signs among signs, and in “learning, in interpreting signs, they grow and become [...] more developed signs. It is the process of learning and evolving that brings together *ens reale* (reality) and *ens rationis* (our knowledge of reality)” (Semetsky and Campbell 2018: 124-125).

From a contiguous perspective, museum scholars, by blending (socio-)linguistic and architectonic terminology and notions, interpret the space of the museum as a whole, operating it as a communicative text. They show how not only the exhibits “make meaning” in a museum, but also the linguistic strategies of captions and panels, the ways of communicating with the public, the architecture, the spatial arrangement (etc.) contribute to reinforce ideas and mind-frames, which orient and shape the visitor's perception. In their words:

The *organizational, interactional and representational frameworks* can illuminate the meaning-making resources of museum-texts [... which are] connected with exhibits, exhibitions and institutions [...]. Language is an important part of these meaning-making processes [...]. *Framing practices* contribute important organizational meanings to the exhibition as a text [...]. The pathways [of the exhibitions] are meaning-making sociocultural construct and bring information value to the organization of the space. [... An] exhibition [can have] the *prefix* of a long entrance and the *suffix* of an additional gallery [...]. The use of distinctive confronting architecture is a way of strongly framing the institution and contributing to its perceived *salience*. [... For example] the Musée Pompidou makes an extensive use of glass and open vistas to connect the inside with the outside (Ravelli 2006: 124,126, passim; our italics).

These kinds of interplay are defined by some museum scholars (McDonald 2007; Ravelli 2006; Witcomb 2003; Screven 1995) as *adaptive* interactivity, or *spatial* and *dialogic interactivity*, that

enables visitors to negotiate meanings, and not simply receive them ‘passively’. For our purposes, interactional meaning ... is concerned with the ways in which interlocutors engage with each other in the communication process. Museums, through their communicative practices, take up a ‘speaking role’, and enable roles to be taken up by others, both visitors and relevant communities.... This includes the style and stance of communication and the affectual responses of visitors. (Ravelli and Heberle 2016:8)⁸

Accordingly, the observation and analysis of such spatial/virtual texts need to move among the institutions as situated in their socio-historical contexts, architectural coding, exhibitions, artefacts and museumgoers. Furthermore, in many loci, the (virtual) users can both “look at” and “move through” the museum texts, contributing to actualizing the symbolic/cultural values and shaping the representational meanings of the exhibits, their (virtual) affordances and the potential intertextual references.

⁸ Ravelli and Heberle (2016) propose a useful review of the studies of spatial texts (museums) from a number of perspectives, ranging from cultural studies, philosophy, phenomenology and sociology to architecture. As multimodal, communicative resources, spatial texts have been analysed by a number of scholars, whose “approaches are characterized by taking a social semiotic approach to communication, exemplified in the work of Michael Halliday on language [...] in his famous model of systemic-functional linguistics, adapted and extended to visual texts by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, in their seminal *Reading Images: the Grammar of Visual Design* (2006)” (Ravelli and Heberle 2016: 6; see §3 for a full bibliography).

Apparently, the self-perception of the visitors within and through the museum structures and frameworks is a vital component of the meaning-making process at stake.

2.2. Multimodal discourse analysis and intersemiosis

To what extent can non-verbal iconicity constitute a productive semantics? Since the seminal intuitions of Kress and van Leeuwen (e.g. Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 2006; van Leeuwen 2013, 2008; Kress 2010), who outlined and applied clear and detailed frameworks for “reading images”, the theoretical and applied components of MDA have flourished (among others, see Hofinger and Ventola 2004; Jewitt, Bezemer and O’Halloran 2016; Bateman, Wildfeuer and Hippala 2017; Bateman 2014; Bateman and Wildfeuer 2014; Norris 2019)⁹. There is a frequent emphasis on the socio-educational aspects (Bezemer, Jewitt, Diamantopoulou, Kress and Mavers 2012), racial issues (Rogers 2020, 2016), or gender (Page 2019).

Interestingly, Liu and O’Halloran (2009) and O’Halloran (2011, 2008) have indicated how the cohesion between the verbal and non-verbal elements of texts – their intersemiotic texture (ITx) – is the distinguishing feature of multimodal texts with the effect of integrating different modes rather than simply linking them. In the same vein, Bateman (2014) has extensively accounted for the nature and scope of such texture from many different perspectives, including diachronically, taking Roland Barthes’s seminal ideas (1957; 1964) into due consideration. Concisely, for the purpose of this study, the verbal text can either paraphrase/elaborate/explain/expand or contrast/reduce the image, potentially disambiguating and specifying its meaning. Bateman also considered the possible developments of the Rhetoric Structure Theory (Bateman 2014: 213–220), which focuses on communicative effectiveness, at a multimodal level.

Such interpretive resources contribute to outlining aspects of the “navigation paths” (Ravelli and Mcmurtrie 2016) that are made available to the museumgoers by looking at/seeing/reading, listening to, moving through, and, in turn, narrating.

2.3. Appraisal framework

For the (narrative) verbal elements under investigation in this study, a selection of the tools of the Appraisal Framework (AF) was utilized. Informed by SFL, the AF proposes a multi-layered approach for “exploring, describing and explaining the way language is used to evaluate, to adopt stances, to construct textual personas and to manage interpersonal positionings and relationships” (White 2020). Martin made a remarkable contribution to its elaboration, and in his words:

Systemic Functional Linguistics [...] is the theory. APPRAISAL is a description of resources for evaluation in English. [...] From a relational perspective [...],

⁹Norris (2019) in particular is an exhaustive guide through this rich domain.

words don't have meaning; rather they do meaning – they mean in relation to the other words that might have been chosen. Similarly, groups and phrases mean in relation to other groups and phrases, [...], etc., which] means describing how evaluative meanings are related to one another (2017: 22-23).

Among the rich and fine-grained resources for evaluation in English illustrated in the AF, the category of ATTITUDINAL positioning (subtypes: AFFECT, JUDGEMENT, APPRECIATION) was utilized, given the pronounced affectual quality of the visitors' verbal recordings (within the *Visitor Voices* initiative). Indeed, the AF is concerned more specifically with the language of evaluation, attitude, emotion, and with how speakers/writers respond emotionally to the people, events, issues, and artifacts being evaluated. This makes the AF the ideal framework to investigate the stories told by the NMAAHC visitors, who both recounted family stories of slavery and/or personal stories of discrimination/violence, and expressed their emotional reactions to artifacts and documented stories/events. In some detail, the Attitudinal positioning emerges as a feature/property not only of individual words (though individual words may be “attitudinal”), but also of entire utterances/texts.

3. Observational data

3.1. The enclosing organizational-interactional framework – the NMAAHC architecture

The distinctive NMAAHC architecture strongly contributes to framing the institution. Its location next to the Washington Monument, not far from the White House, is intrinsically salient in the cityscape. As the visitors ascend to the upper levels of the building, by circulating around the corona, they can capture views of the Washington Monument and the largely neoclassical architectural monuments nearby – the Mall, the Federal Triangle buildings and the Monument grounds – in a complex dynamics of symbols. Moreover, the 3,600 bronze-coloured lattice panels covering the building façade are a contemporary riff on the ornate ironwork found in Charleston, Savannah and New Orleans, which was largely built by slaves. These panels create a kind of osmotic continuity with the external environment, allowing daylight in through dappled openings and generating an ambient glow at night (Figure 1).

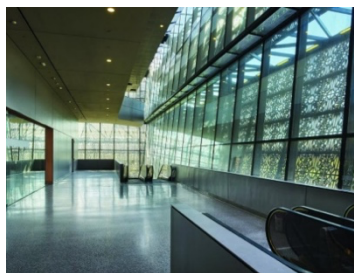


Figure 1. Dappled openings, spatial osmosis¹⁰

¹⁰ From <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/building>. Unless otherwise specified, the NMAAHC's website is the source for the images utilized in this paper according to the museum's open access

Furthermore, the museum's three-tiered façade, the corona, reaches upwards in an expression of strength, faith, hope and resiliency (Figure 2). As the architect David Adjaye explained, he was inspired by West African sculptures of female figures surmounted by pyramid-shaped crowns, which evoked in him both the head wraps worn by many African American women in the US and their hands raised in praise or prayer: "I was fascinated with how these [shapes] were connected [...]. It was so uncanny to make connections between the Yoruba caryatid and modern expressions in black America. They became clues to the architecture of the building" (quoted in Byrd 2016). The interactional value of such architectural clues, which also shape the skyline of the area, reach out not only to the museumgoers but also to the onlookers.



Figure 2. Three-tiered corona – a framed skyline¹¹

In particular, to be able to look at the monument to the first president of the United States from the confrontational architecture of the NMAAHC significantly contributes to changing perspectives on the meaning and salience of the African American role in US history (Figure 3). That is, if you look at the world famous obelisk at eye level, through a bright glass opening, which is slightly tapering, oblique and framed within lattice panels, it does not look so imposing after all – maybe somehow more belonging to the beholder?



Figure 3. Framed view of the Washington Monument

policy (for more, see note 3) and, additionally, to copyright disclaimer section 107 of Copyright Act of 1976, which permitted fair use for purposes like criticism, commentary, news reporting, teaching, scholarship and research.

¹¹ At <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/building> as are the following images.

The main pathway for visitors consists in an upward movement, which spatially conveys the idea of the rise of African Americans in the US. The visit starts three levels underground (ca. 60% of the NMAAHC is underground), where the chronological narrative begins with the advent of slavery in the dimly lit History Galleries (Figure 4).

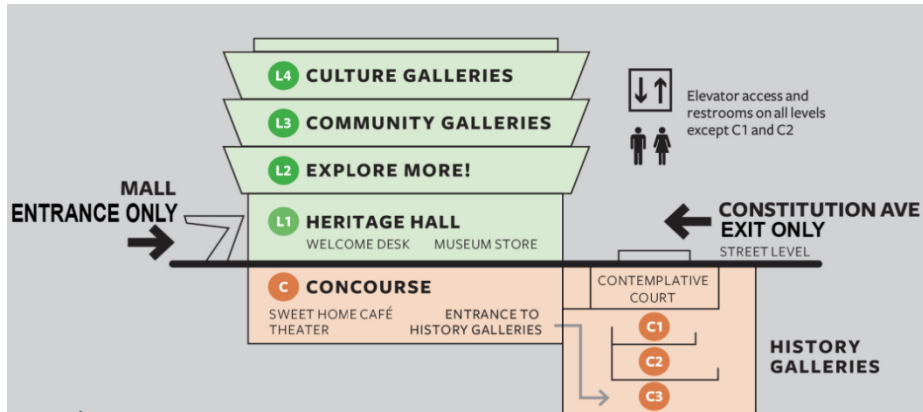


Figure 4. A map for all – a learning pathway¹²

In the Slavery and Freedom gallery (C3 – three levels underground, Figure 5), the exhibits include two slave cabins, a 16.5-foot cotton tower, and artefacts from a wrecked slave ship and from the civil war. The low ceilings and lack of natural light contribute to represent the oppression of the slaves' condition, thus intensifying the emotional impact of these galleries, whose “suffixes”, upward leading ramps, are spaces for reflection.

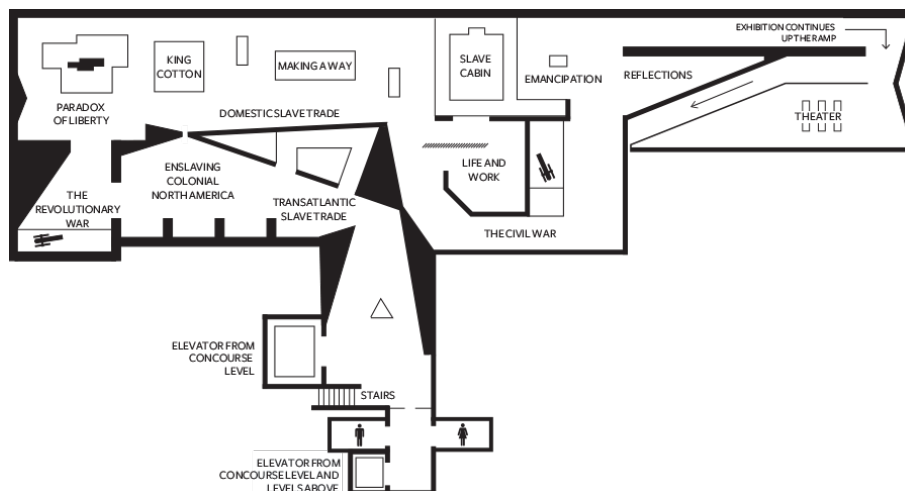


Figure 5. Slavery and Freedom, 1400-1877

In the same vein, the C2 and C1 galleries feature segregation (Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom: The Era of Segregation 1876-1968) and change (‘A Changing America: 1968 and Beyond’), respectively.

¹² From <https://nmaahc.si.edu/visit/maps>.

In light of the still-unsolved issues connected to race, such immersive trips through history resonate¹³ and foreground the need for both a national conversation and personal considerations. Indeed, while gradually progressing upwards, the visitors arrive at the circular sun-flooded Contemplative Court, where such a need for reconsideration appears to be spatially objectified. The Court contains an oculus opening with a cylindrical cascade, falling into a reflection pond that is lined on two sides with stone benches (Figure 6)¹⁴. In this dedicated interactional space, they can reframe the meanings of what they have been shown, possibly bringing *ens reale* and *ens rationis* together (i.e., the recollection of painful family histories or experiences and the information and critical analysis of the African-American experience provided by exhibitions), before continuing their visit on the upper levels to admire the gradual, ingenious progress of African Americans and their achievements.



Figure 6. The concourse floor map and detail of the Contemplative Court

After going past the Court, the visitors can reach the bright aboveground halls with high ceilings and picture windows to explore the development of the black community in the US. The achievements of both black leaders (in politics and industry) and everyday citizens who have shaped American culture along the way are celebrated there. The black experience is presented as a vital component of every US citizen's identity in areas such as sports, the army, music, the theatre, movies, visual arts, hair, style, etc.

Overall, the NMAAHC operates as a kind of synergic spatial text encompassing both its distinctive building, which shapes the inside/outside space relationship, and its contents, as well as the visitors. Its unique design plays a major role in these dynamics, creating a kind of semiotic continuity between the environment, the architectural dimensions and the contents.

¹³ For example, Harriet "General" Tubman's lace shawl, Emmett Till's coffin, and a plane flown by Tuskegee airmen are exhibited as highly symbolic landmarks in the long and challenging historical itinerary.

¹⁴ The mirroring effect of water is a recurring feature; the south entry is composed of a porch with an upward tilted roof reflecting the moving water below. The porch functions as an extension of the building into the landscape.

3.2. Immersive environment, flowing audio-visuals, integrated verbal texts

Symbolically, the Navigation Path for visitors unfolds along an upward-moving dimension. Indeed, learning, liberated from the specific domain of education, is the keyword and guiding principle in walking through this rich, multi-layered, semiotic Umwelt. From the underground Slavery and Freedom gallery to the aboveground Community and Culture galleries, the history of the African American population is revealed through boards that invite reading and make the meaning of the objects explicit, together with images (pictures, photos and maps, also shown through sliding panels), videos, voices (spoken commentaries) and music¹⁵. The richness of the resources displayed, including the 3D objects, and the sense of the magnitude of the African American history the museum conveys cannot – predictably – be rendered in a written essay. The need to ‘narrate’ and investigate both verbal and non-verbal resources (e.g. boards, artefacts, music, songs, dance, paintings, films) in the same textual space, using mostly words, entails some inevitable losses (including the perception of the movement and abundance of the frames, the rhythm, the concentration of information), as Page (2010) made clear. Additionally, due to space limitations, it will not be possible to present even a selection of examples from the exhibitions, which will be the topic of another study (Abbamonte and Antinucci 2022).

Here, attention will be given to such aspects of the NMAAHC’s multimodal communication modes, where words and stories are often salient, and to the affectual comments the exhibitions elicit.

3.2.1 Multimodal racial literacies

The teaching orientation of the NMAAHC (representing ‘a people’s journey, a nation’s story’) is pervasive (Figure 7) in the many-sided efforts to tell a more complete version of US history through many lenses. Along the navigation path, gender and motherhood issues, the development of black enterprise, the stories of all-black settlements, and black education, sports, voting rights, arts, style, movie and theatre are all accounted for in relation to each other as the museum text unfolds.



Figure 7. Interactive research itineraries – teaching/learning/sharing racial literacies

¹⁵ Overall, the average visiting time for the NMAAHC amounts to 4-5 hours (in-depth activities excluded), and to illustrate its itineraries falls outside the scope of the present study. However, a huge amount of exhibits and materials are freely available online; in the words of Lonnie G. Bunch III (2021), “Browsing our #SmithsonianOpenAccess collections can brighten a gray day. These high res images are available for you to use however you like, without asking permission”.

In many loci, black history is explained with explicit attention to narratives (Figure 8), which invite other narratives, and the books displayed (e.g. Migration Stories) appear ready to become workbooks for other stories.

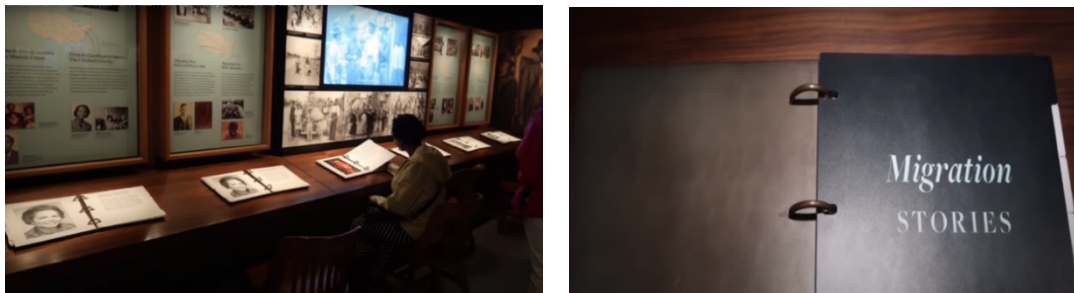


Figure 8. Easy-to-browse books – stories to be continued

Indeed, in celebration of Black History Month¹⁶, the museum invites the public “to engage with digital resources to preserve, digitize and share African American family history. Begin Your Family History Journey”. To that end, there is a dedicated section in the L2 gallery. Additionally, the museum has promoted the Oral History Initiative, which aims at collecting and interpreting the stories of the elderly and significant members of communities, thus preserving memories of past events from oblivion.

3.3. Visitor Voices

The organizational and representational frameworks of the NMAAHC could be defined as “mediums of spatial storytelling” (Lu 2017: 442)¹⁷, but this does not exhaust their interactional value since they are also spatial story listening frameworks. Indeed, the NMAAHC’s Oral History initiative was very successful in 2017, when around 40,000 visitors recorded short video speeches recounting their personal reflections on the exhibitions in the available booths. Apparently, many were inspired to stand up for positive values and felt the need to share such an urge. Such ‘Visitor Voices’ recordings are available through the museum’s YouTube channel¹⁸ so that a wider public can listen to these stories, narratives, or (affectual) comments/reactions from the visitors. This interesting cross-media campaign was promoted (in 2017) as described below:

The Visitor Voices campaign highlights the Museum’s community of visitors and reflects their stories. Audiences are invited to share aspects of their visit – to empower them to see themselves as part of the museum’s history and community.

¹⁶ Black History Month usually occurs in February in the US and Canada and in October in Ireland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The initiative is now spreading to other countries with the shared purpose to adopt a more comprehensive approach, to the effect that black history is also American history and European history, and which needs to be narrated from the perspective of black historians too.

¹⁷ “Museums commonly adopt storytelling in their interpretive framework by use of audiovisual techniques to convey the meanings contained within artefacts. In addition to audiovisual mediation [...] museum architecture itself can also be regarded as a medium of spatial storytelling, specifically of historical time, which is manifested spatially and cognitively for museum visitors”.

¹⁸ Available at <https://www.youtube.com/c/NMAAHC>.

Visitors are able to record their experience in our Reflections Booths located in our history galleries, or are invited to share via a social media staffer. So, to thank our incredible community of visitors, we are celebrating our anniversary month with a new series called #VisitorVoices. 30 days. 30 voices. 30 stories. So make sure to subscribe and tune in daily, as our visitors voice and share their own stories and reflections on #APeoplesJourney. A Nation's Story. Have you visited the museum? Tell us about your experience in the comment section! #VisitorVoices. (NMAAHC, 2017, our italics)

Stories, anecdotes, accounts, histories and narratives are expressions of the species-specific human faculty of making sense of the world, as both structural and post-classical narratologies have variously explained (as concisely illustrated in Author, 2019). Therefore, giving people the opportunity to voice their considerations, reactions and memories in response to their visits – i.e. to interpret signs, thus becoming more developed signs – enhances their opportunity to develop and to promote change by bringing together *ens reale* and *ens rationis*.

What follow are the transcribed texts of seven stories out of the 12 included on the museum's dedicated webpage in 2017 to celebrate the NMAAHC's first anniversary. The texts are annotated in terms of appraisal, as illustrated in the legend (Table 1)¹⁹. Predictably, the syntax is non-standard, since the visitors are just voicing, not writing, their stories or comments/reactions; hence, these verbatim transcriptions retain the oral discourse forms²⁰.

Table 1. Legend

<p>APPRAISAL FRAMEWORK – ATTITUDINAL POSITIONING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Affect (positive + negative--): positive and negative emotional responses and dispositions; * Judgement + --: human behaviours/actions are positively or negatively assessed by reference to some set of social norms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Capacity, tenacity o Propriety^{Pr}, veracity^{Vr} o Normality* * Appreciation + -- : assessments of objects, artefacts, processes and states of affairs/behaviours
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¹⁹ The description of the resources for evaluation in English in the AF is rich and multi-layered; a look at the synoptic contents of the “framed version” is illustrative of this (see White 2020). It is feasible to utilize more resources for textual analysis at the same time by highlighting the different evaluative and discursive features cohesively interacting within the same text. Yet, for readability's sake, when annotating a text, it is expedient to select the more functional set of descriptors, which in this case was Attitude and its sub-systems: Judgement, Appreciation and Affect (whose meanings are only mentioned, very concisely, in the legend). Some overlapping, e.g. between positive Affect and positive Appreciation, may occur. Furthermore, annotation is clearer when it is selective; in other words, if every noticeable word is highlighted, the effect can be confusing.

²⁰ Concisely, these transcriptions were made verbatim, leaving out the full names and details of the visitors and the phonetic transcriptions of their short pauses, intonation changes, background/channel noises, etc. (the speeches are available at the links provided). Only longer pauses resulting in anacoluthons are signalled with three dots. The texts reproduce the oral form of the speeches. In short, “[t]he two basic transcription styles, *naturalized transcription*, in which the text conforms to written discourse conventions, and *denaturalized transcription*, in which the text retains links to oral discourse forms, have equal potential to serve as politicized tools of linguistic representation” (Bucholz 2000: 1439).

Table 2. Visitors' speeches

Text number, title and short comments	Integral transcription of the visitors' speeches
<p>1. This Is My Story That I Know of Slavery</p> <p>SHORT COMMENT: A story of utmost powerlessness. Some inconsistencies in the first part of the narrative.</p>	<p>My name is Joyce [...], my story of slavery deals with my great-great-grandmother who was a slave^{Vr}, and her mother had twins. They were Mary and Martha. They were sold. My great-great-grandmother was asked to sell her two twins. She had to choose one. She could keep one or sell the other.</p> <p>She chose to keep Martha. She wanted to keep both⁺ but when she asked if she could keep both, she <i>was hit</i>⁻ and the master told her <u>he would sell both</u>⁻ of them if she didn't choose one. She chose Martha^{Vr}.</p> <p>Martha was my great-great-grandmother and she had Maddie, who was my grandmother, and Maddie had Evie Pain, who was my mother. This is my story that I know of slavery^{Vr} and I am so grateful for this opportunity⁺.</p> <p>[https://youtu.be/IBJNBavD8IE]</p>
<p>2. Modern-Day Sharecropper</p> <p>SHORT COMMENT: First-hand story, lingering past, engagement with the artifacts.</p>	<p>My name is Prince William [...] actually I am a sharecropper^{Vr}. My father, we were all sharecropper until 1992^{Vr}. So, this museum and the exhibits actually affects me first hand because we suffered⁻ through this until, until current day. We were raising tobacco down in Clay Hill, Virginia, which is located in Franklin County, Virginia. And we gone through these things that are being displayed here at the Museum^{Vr}. My father told me stories about where they had to go to church on Sundays and they also had to steal away⁻. And one thing they told me they had to use was <i>a black pot and the black pot was turned upside down in order to, quote unquote, catch the voices</i>⁻ from the church when they started shouting and also <i>to really praise God</i>⁺. And if they didn't use that then the, <u>the white people that were around, they will come to the church and basically harass them</u>⁻. And he said on many occasion[s] that <i>they had to jump out the windows</i>⁻ when they came by and, <u>and harassing them on</u>⁻, all Sundays when <i>they were trying to worship</i>⁺, so all this is really first-hand^{Vr}. You know it hits home really when I, when I look at all these exhibits⁻ because you know most people think that sharecropping ended in the early 1930s^{Pr} or whatnot, <u>but for our family here in the US it didn't end until 1992</u>⁻.</p> <p>[https://youtu.be/qdJ_r3mEwoo]</p>
<p>3. Descended from Slavery</p> <p>SHORT COMMENT: Sharing a story of mixed ancestry from a slave and a slave owner,</p>	<p>I am Minetta [...] and this is my aunt Juanita [...]. Our family has ties back to slavery days^{Vr}. Our matriarch Ellen Fisher was a slave back in... I believe she was born in 1840. She was owned by the O'K [...] family, James O'K, and she was beaten and blinded in one eye⁻ and bore several children of the O'K's, which we have done DNA testing to prove that. She bore him three sons^{Vr}, Daniel, Will and Doc O'K. We are descendants of Daniel O'K^{Vr}, <i>and how we share our story about slavery is</i>⁺...we have our family reunions^{Pr} and they have been held <i>ever since 1930</i>[*]. And <i>we pass</i></p>

ownership of one's own story.	<i>along the family tradition of spreading our oral history*</i> , telling the history of Ellen Fisher and all of our ancestors. [https://youtu.be/wrn2CA1_1nE]
4. Shackles of Children SHORT COMMENT: The saliency of the real object, embodied cognition.	I am Diamond [...] I am 21 years old. I think the part of the exhibit so far <i>that's resonated most with me</i> was not just seeing the shackles of the enslaved individuals but <i>seeing the shackles of the children and the pendants that were worn as a form of empowerment by the slave owners that look just like the shackles</i> . It is like a <i>trophy</i> almost, I think just seeing them up close and personal... you hear about it all the time but <i>all these artefacts and things in here are real. Very real</i> . And seeing them you know, <i>in perspective to my body</i> , those shackles <i>how tight they are, how heavy they are</i> it just, <i>it touches you in a place that has been untapped</i> , and I think <i>it's good that this museum is here</i> because <i>it will continue to educate not only black but white people as well</i> + and hopefully <i>help unify us</i> ⁺ in a fight that is still ongoing much more bigger than any of us could ever imagine. [https://youtu.be/tFHQwFBNEzY]
5. Unimaginable To Me SHORT COMMENT: Emotional identification with the process.	Patrice: Hi my name is Patrice [...] and this is my daughter Leila. Steve: And I am Steve [Patrice's husband]. Steve: What part of this museum <i>resonates the most with us?</i> Patrice: I just passed through the part where they were talking about the mothers giving birth to their children and <i>half of them not even survived the first year</i> , and being a new mom I, it just <i>touched my heart</i> ... to have to leave her to go and nurse another child. It is just <i>unimaginable to me</i> . [https://youtu.be/3xZk7sr1HCY]
6. I Never Knew About Emmett Till SHORT COMMENT: The shock of learning, empathy. Proposals: a successful learning itinerary. From negative to positive appreciation and affect.	The Emmett Till exhibition really <i>hit me hard</i> . <i>I had to do a lot of things to stop me from crying</i> , but I never knew... <i>I never knew about Emmett Till til I came here today</i> . <i>No one ever talked about it</i> . <i>That wasn't something they willingly brought up in history class</i> and to come here and realize ^{vi} that <i>this young boy my age got shot over something so stupid</i> , was <i>brutally murdered</i> . It is just something that <i>hurts my heart</i> , and <i>to know that we are going back into the same direction after we fought so hard to get out of that</i> <i>also really hurts</i> . So I would just like to ask anyone who sees this, <i>to try your best to be a better person, to be a prouder person, to be proud of you</i> ⁺ and where you came from but <i>don't look down on others</i> , <i>because of where they came from</i> . To be positive and <i>always lend a helping hand to take care of others</i> ⁺ . Be a servant! It doesn't mean, you know, be weak. It means <i>to be strong and loving and caring and kind</i> ⁺ . <i>That's something that we should do. That's something that we should start as a nation, as a world, as a country, as a planet!</i> ⁺ <i>Love each other!</i> ⁺ [https://youtu.be/xwfbWBYc4ao]
7. 30 Days of Reflections SHORT COMMENT: An edited	It's so overwhelming at first -- to see the history that had not been told -- seeing the shackles of the children -- it's just unimaginable to me -- it really hit me hard. I had to do a lot of things to stop me from crying -- triggers your mind, it triggers your heart. Triggers past memories of your ancestors dating back so many years. The

<p>collage of the comments of 30 (small groups of) visitors, where the more significant phrases are selected. The double hyphens mark the transitions from one speaker to another.</p>	<p>effects of slavery are still being felt today -- the marches and the protests and the struggles -- I have seen freedom, I have experienced segregation -- and freedom to me is the right to choose who you want to love -- liberation -- peace -- and being black you can be beautiful as well -- hmm, what else? -- UNITY [in chorus] -- so many stories to tell -- who we are as a people -- follow your heart -- know your culture -- never let us forget history, because history is the true teacher. [https://youtu.be/XcyXIQTlTxk]</p>
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3.4. Discussion

The issues raised in these short speeches range from the personal to the societal dimension. The relation between ‘stories’ and ‘history’ is the key notion. In Text 1, a testimony is offered, in a factual style, of a tragic family memory of slavery: an enslaved mother obliged to choose which of her new-born twins was to be sold to other slave owners. This handed-down memory has the value of history for the speaker, Joyce, who states ‘This Is My Story That I Know of Slavery and I am so grateful for this opportunity’, thus closing her testimony with a positive appreciation of the museum setting she is in, and of the potential of storytelling. By the same token, in Text 2, the titular modern-day sharecropper voices his recollection of his father’s narratives. He (the sharecropper) experienced such artefacts as tokens of a lingering past, which is perceived by him as present reality at an affectual level: ‘the exhibits actually affects me first hand because we suffered through this until [...] current day [...] Sharecropping [...] it didn’t end until 1992’. Thus, the artefacts evoked both reported family stories and vivid personal memories of working conditions that are negatively evaluated.

In Text 3, Minetta, a descendant of a slave and a slave owner, tells her family story of mixed ancestry; her attitudinal positioning to the situation is not entirely negative. She recounts the painful story of her matriarch, but, at the same time, she claims the right to deal with her story in the way she and her relatives think proper: ‘and how we share our story about slavery is [...] And we pass along the family tradition of spreading our oral history’. A resilient attitude emerges, and, seemingly, the dominant notion is that visitors claim ownership of their family stories and, to some extent, believe them to be truer than history. Such an attitude is in line with the Family History Journey of the museum that constantly attempts to expand the scope for changing the social awareness and cognition of racial issues.

Other levels of engagement are the reaction to objects and empathy with (a series of) stories. In Text 4, the salience of the shackles for children deeply affected the visitor, who physically felt and then voiced their constraining power and the oppression of the shackle-shaped pendants that were probably worn as a form of self-empowerment by the slave owners. In a highly emotional language she explains how ‘seeing the shackles of the children [...in perspective to my

body] and the pendants [...] like a trophy' is different from 'hear[ing] about it all the time', and much more negatively affecting: 'it touches you in a place that has been untapped'. Yet, the final emphasis is on education, positive change, union.

In text (5), the dire destiny of the children born in slavery and their mothers creates an intense emotional engagement that makes such learning embodied. The attitudinal positioning is negative.

Interestingly, in Text 6, the discovery of the gruesome death of Emmett Till 'really hit hard' for the visitor, who suffered a kind of cognitive and emotional shock, since she also realized the unjust erasure of that death in history classes, 'That wasn't something they willingly brought up in history class [...] that hurts my heart'. Her attitudinal positioning to the present state of affairs is also negative, 'to know that we are going back into the same direction after we fought so hard to get out of that also really hurts'.

Yet, her following reaction was positive in that she attributed an educational potential to that story, 'I would just like to ask anyone who sees this, to try your best to be a better person [...] To be positive and always lend a helping hand to take care of others'.

As Stenglin (2004) pointed out, space in museums can be organised along the dimensions of Binding and Bonding to create solidarity on an interpersonal level. Apparently, given the success of the Visitor Voices campaign, the enveloping spatial arrangement of the history galleries, with their reflection booths, made visitors feel welcome, engaged, and willing to record their experiences or stories, thus helping them to reveal/denounce racial issues and affirm positive values, consistent with the museum's pedagogical aims.

4. Concluding remarks

Through the visitors' voices, artefacts and objects, such as the children's shackles, the black pot used to muffle black people's religious songs or Emmett Till's casket, resonate and develop new meanings. The navigation paths, outlined by the synergic organizational, interactional and representational frameworks of the museum, evidently shaped effective multimodal learning itineraries for them. Indeed, the NMAAHC's visitors have ample access to the unvarnished truth of the nation's racial past, which is made clear and enhanced by the resources of the museum's sophisticated polymedia environment, and are encouraged to become also producers of stories and meanings, i.e. prosumers, in the museum's continued spatial and dialogic interactivity that re-semiotizes artefacts into pedagogic tools.

In museum studies, the relevance of new media and the interaction of different semiotic resources in meaning-making are not easily overvalued. Indeed, besides a variety of initiatives²¹, a distinguishing feature of the museum

²¹ Concerts, the "Hip-Hop and Rap" Kickstarter campaign (in which people were invited to create rap lyrics echoing a traditional rap cypher), dance performances, book publishing and presentations, etc.

is its ‘digital-first museum state-of-the-art technology’, which gives visitors hands-on connections with both historical and contemporary events/performances²².

Let us briefly mention the estimated five million users accessing the NMAAHC’s Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Snapchat channels each month, where, through hashtag narratives and visual media, marginalized voices can be endorsed in the digital semiosphere²³. The new information and facts about their ancestors the prosumers learn while visiting the Family History Center (also accessible online) are often shared through letters, social media and/or personal videos in the technologically enhanced Umwelt of the NMAAHC. Such forms of adaptive interactivity have evidently found their more intense expression in the Visitor Voices initiative, where the style and stance of communication and the affectual responses of visitors are effectively conveyed.

Furthermore, the museum’s educational resources reach out to online audiences and classes around the world to help students develop both tools to understand the contemporary world in the light of its historical antecedents and their sense of civic participation²⁴. The NMAAHC regularly promotes initiatives to enhance the value of Black History Month, which can be traced back to Negro History Week, launched in February 1926 by Carter G. Woodson, in the attempt to introduce an unbiased portrayal of African Americans into the national record. Yet, a yearly emphasis lasting for one month cannot be enough to change perspectives on the events. Instead, the NMAAHC works as a museum text throughout the year to make the role of African Americans visible in US national history at a multimodal/multimedia level and to develop racial literacies through the medium of English – once the language of the slave owners and slaves, now the language of new, conscious literacies. In Amanda Gorman’s words, “We have seen the ways in which language has been violated and used to dehumanize. How can I reclaim English so we can see it as a source of hope, purification and consciousness?”²⁵

²² For example, in collaboration with the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of American History, the NMAAHC’s “Webby Award-winning website gave more than 3.4 million users access to the Museum’s collection of more than 10,000 digitized objects and collection stories. More than 60,000 users downloaded the Museum’s ‘Mobile Stories’ app, named one of the Best Apps for Teaching & Learning by the American Association of School Librarians” (NMAAHC 2018).

²³ Such as #APeoplesJourney (stories of African Americans from the past and present) or #ANationsStory (where the African American experience is situated into American history and culture). See also “Explore NMAAHC Collections in 3D” at <https://youtu.be/UoWpZOQxfBk>.

²⁴ See <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/nmaahc-digital-resources-guide>.

²⁵ M. Obama, “Unity With Purpose”. Amanda Gorman and Michelle Obama Discuss Art, Identity and Optimism, at <https://time.com/5933596/amanda-gorman-michelle-obama-interview/>. Feb 4, 2021.

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