

Selective Memories: The Civil Rights Movement in Museum Exhibitions

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America's violent racial past makes it challenging for museums to exhibit the nation's history. Mainstream museums relegate racial incidents to the sidelines and racially specific museums struggle to tell these stories. Civil rights tourism gained popularity in the early 1990s following the openings of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, the National Civil Rights Museum and the National Voting Rights Museum. Since the opening of these museums, many scholars and civil rights activists have lamented the ways in which the movement has been remembered through the media, museums and memorials. The Civil Rights Movement in American memory has been studied across different disciplines and the consensus is that it has largely been reduced to a neat, compact and fairly pleasant package. In an effort to make the uncomfortable comfortable, America has retouched, clipped and removed parts of the story to create a convenient, less threatening narrative. This narrative generally begins with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1952 and ends with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968. This narrative is fit for easy consumption but excludes important and more complicated aspects of the movement. It does not consider black activism before the 1950s, excludes black women, glorifies and simplifies Martin Luther King, Jr. and does not connect segregation and Jim Crow to today's enduring racial inequality. Museums have been complicit in this oversimplification. What follows is an exploration of the locations of civil rights memory, the dominant civil rights narratives and how these narratives came to be.

Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham, Alabama, is the site where Bull Connor unleashed police dogs and fire hoses on nonviolent black protesters in 1963. The park has been rededicated as "A Place of Revolution and Reconciliation" and now features a walkway called the "Freedom Walk". The walkway is lined with sculptures of attack dogs, water

cannons and jailed school children. The sculpture of the jailed children reads, “Segregation is a sin.” Scholars Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman offer that this memorial marks a shift in black history commemoration because it is located in a public space; one previously reserved for whites only. They argue, “the geography of commemoration—where these stories could and could not be told—has undergone a dramatic restructuring.”<sup>1</sup> However, Kelly Ingram Park and sites of other protests, marches and violence are generally considered more deserving of preservation and commemoration. Local sites like churches, bus stations and beauty salons are not so gallantly preserved or commemorated. Frank Smith, Jr., executive director of the African American Civil War Museum recalls working “with people in church basements and lonely places” as a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Though it may be difficult to turn these sites into museums or memorials they should be more widely represented in exhibitions as part of the story of the Civil Rights Movement. The National Voting Rights Museum in Selma, Alabama is an interesting exception. The museum is located in an old cotton warehouse around the corner from the Edmund Pettus Bridge and site of Bloody Sunday, the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery. The museum’s motto, “the hands that picked cotton can pick presidents,”<sup>3</sup> recognizes the power and contribution of poor black Americans who had everything to lose and everything to gain by organizing. Locating this museum in a cotton warehouse acknowledges the importance these everyday spaces played in the movement. However, some argue that this museum’s location aids in the

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<sup>1</sup> Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory*, (Chicago: The Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2008), 27

<sup>2</sup> Barrington Salmon. “Student Involvement in Civil Rights Focus of Newseum Exhibit.” (*Washington Informer*, August 2013)

<sup>3</sup> Dwyer and Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials*, 34

continued isolation and confinement of the movement both geographically and within public memory.<sup>4 5</sup>

The Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, National Civil Rights Museum and Voting Rights Museum are all located in predominately black cities in the South. The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute was opened in 1992 and is located adjacent to Kelly Ingram Park and Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Debates about the Institute's location were hostile, with some city officials suggesting that the museum could be built outside of the black neighborhood if "human rights" could substitute "civil rights" on the moniker. When the National Civil Rights Museum was proposed in Memphis, Tennessee at the Lorraine Motel, local opponents argued that the motel should be torn down because it was a mark of civic shame. The National Voting Rights Museum in Selma was solely funded by private donations and visitor contributions. Museum founders had to lobby the city to contribute an annual stipend and include the museum on the city's tourism brochures.<sup>6</sup> As interest in civil rights tourism grew, these cities became more willing to support the museums financially. The geographic location and isolation of civil rights memorials and museums and the absence of civil rights exhibitions in mainstream museums indicate the place the civil rights movement occupies in American society.<sup>7</sup> In addition to location, political and economic interests influence and control how museums develop exhibition content.

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<sup>4</sup> Dwyer and Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials*, 16

<sup>5</sup> Robyn Autry, The political economy of memory: the challenges of representing national conflict at 'identity-driven' museums." *Theory and Society* 42, (2013): 64

<sup>6</sup> Dwyer and Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials*, 67

<sup>7</sup> *ibid* 16

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute's initial planning was co-opted by economic motives that influenced the mission of the museum. In the late 1970s a committee of black and white citizens began planning a civil rights museum in Birmingham. David Vann, a white liberal and former mayor of Birmingham, advocated for a museum that would showcase the biracial cooperation that ended the demonstrations in 1963. Vann and the committee felt a civil rights museum could help heal the city but many residents thought the museum would only further hurt the city's image. During his reelection campaign, Birmingham's first black mayor, Richard Arrington, withdrew consideration for the museum in an effort not to alienate white voters. The committee continued to plan and incorporated some of the criticisms into the design. In 1981 they submitted a report that the museum would be called the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in an effort to create an educational and research center.<sup>8</sup> With the state's intervention the Institute was earmarked for funding and development, and Arrington appointed a taskforce to oversee the remainder of the preparations. Officials made clear that "tourism is a major concern of the city and should be considered in relation to the museum's development."<sup>9</sup> How likely is it then, that the promise of tourist attraction guided the content development for the BCRI?

Initially, seven themes were identified for the BCRI: Threshold, Background, Movement, Vision, Face to Face, Legacies, and The Struggle Continues. The last theme was cut out of the final plans.<sup>10</sup> The museum is designed in a way that reinforces the idea of gradual progress with tolerance as the end goal. It defines the early 1960s as the pivotal years of the movement and credits the events in Birmingham to the passing of the Civil

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<sup>8</sup> Glenn Eskew, "The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the New Ideology of Tolerance," *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006), 34

<sup>9</sup> *ibid* 43

<sup>10</sup> *ibid* 49

Rights Act of 1964. The Act is made to be the climax of the movement and the triumph of tolerance. When the movement “ends,” visitors are prompted to learn about human rights issues around the world. Quite a lot is missing from this narrative. For instance, the sit-ins and desegregation efforts in education are only briefly discussed. This is a missed opportunity because the immersive exhibition recreates a coal mine, a home, a church, a bus and two segregated classrooms in the first few galleries. Each of these galleries is designed to give visitors a visceral look into thorough oppression of segregation but immersive exhibitions are inadequate without strong content.<sup>11</sup> The major issue with the BCRI’s narrative is at the end of the exhibition. In attempt to make the movement relevant to the present day, the exhibit shifts focus from the black struggle for civil rights to human rights issues around the world. Shifting focus to global human rights issues aids in misconception that racial injustice is a) a thing of the past in America and b) that civil rights are for black people and human rights are for everyone else. The Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site does not shift attention to broader human rights issues but does struggle to deliver a comprehensive narrative of King and the broader movement.

The Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site is a two-block conglomerate of buildings including King’s childhood home, Second Ebenezer Baptist Church, the King Center for Social Change, a visitor center and a host of preserved homes. The exhibition in the visitor center chronicles his early life, rise to prominence and his assassination. Like the BCRI, it also features life-size mannequins marching for civil rights. At the King Center visitors can view some of his personal belongings in an intimate exhibition and at Second Ebenezer they can sit in the pews and listen to his sermons. The King Historic Site differs

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<sup>11</sup> Edward T. Linenthal and Kym S. Rice, “Exhibition Reviews.” *The Journal of American History*, (2004): 177

from other civil rights- focused museums and memorials because there is no centralized narrative. Each location in the Site offers different information about King but does not synthesize the information into a cohesive narrative. The Site also does not delve deeply into other areas of the movement. Understandably, the majority of the content throughout the Site centers on King but several avenues could have been used to examine important aspects of the movement. For example, the church played a central role in the lives of civil rights activists but this relationship is underexplored here. The importance of the church both as a spiritual force and physical space should have been examined, especially considering the Site's preservation of King's own Second Ebenezer Baptist Church. This, however, represents the largest issue with the site. It is nearly devoid of all interpretative qualities, leaving visitors to piece a narrative together without guidance or context.<sup>12</sup>

The National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee does a much better job of developing a comprehensive narrative. The museum is located at the Lorraine Motel and also includes the boarding house across the street where James Earl Ray fired the shot that killed Martin Luther King, Jr. Despite being the site of King's death, the NCRM manages to feature him without eclipsing the rest of the narrative with his story. The exhibition begins in 1619 and chronicles the struggle for freedom through the Civil War and Reconstruction before moving on to cover the Civil Rights Movement of the twentieth century. This is extremely important because in doing this, the museum recognizes the persistent activism of black people in North America. The early galleries also examine black leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey and Booker T. Washington and organizations like the National

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<sup>12</sup> Linenthal and Rice, "Exhibition Reviews," 175

Association for the Advancement of Colored People.<sup>13</sup> This information provides valuable context as to how the modern Civil Rights Movement came to be. It positions the movement not as a spontaneous uprising but as the successful culmination of centuries of activism. Many galleries of the exhibit are immersive but, unlike BCRI, provide good content to support what visitors are seeing and hearing. The recreation of the March on Washington is perhaps the strongest part of the exhibition. Visitors are able to stand among life-size sculptures at a model Lincoln Memorial and listen to the speeches that Martin Luther King, Jr., Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, and A. Philip Randolph gave that day.<sup>14</sup> Typically King's "I Have a Dream" is the only speech from the March on Washington to be exhibited in museums, documentaries and other educational programming. It is fantastic that this museum chose to showcase the other brilliant and moving speeches to come out of the movement. The exhibition also discusses the movement's activity in Northern cities. This reveals some of King's more controversial views and counters the notion that racism and segregation were southern issues. When the museum reopened in 2014 after renovations, they introduced a new exhibition on the Black Power Movement.<sup>15</sup> This movement is woefully under and misrepresented in public civil rights memory. The NCRM has been able to challenge some of the issues that exist in the mainstream civil rights narrative but it is not without flaws. Like the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, International Civil Rights Center and Museum and the King National Historic Site, the National Civil Rights Museum fails to bring the movement and civil rights issues into the present day and thoroughly

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<sup>13</sup> Amy Wilson, "National Civil Rights Museum. *The Journal of American History* 83, (1996): 971-976

<sup>14</sup> Linenthal and Rice, "Exhibition Reviews," 181

<sup>15</sup> Jody Mitori "National Civil Rights Museum reopens; the \$27.5-million renovation is designed to give visitors a better understanding and move them to find out more". (The Toronto Star, 26 April 2014).



discuss the role of women in the movement. Where these museums and memorials fail, The International Civil Rights Center and Museum has been able to avoid some of these pitfalls.

The International Civil Rights Center and Museum in Greensboro, North Carolina is dedicated to preserving the Woolworth's where the sit-ins first took place and to tell the story of the Greensboro Four protest and its legacy. The museum opened on February 1, 2010, the fiftieth anniversary of the protests. The museum features a gallery, theater, archival center, and an extensive exhibition space.<sup>16</sup> The ICRM offers a comprehensive and more nuanced reading of the Woolworth counter sit-ins and the broader struggle for civil rights. ICRM's smaller exhibition on the first floor gives visitors a solid reading of less explored segments of the movement. The exhibit uses Pulitzer-Prize winning photojournalist Matthew Lewis' images of the 1963 March on Washington, the 1968 Democratic National Convention, the swearing in of Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall, and the 1968 Poor People's Campaign to tell the story of the struggle for civil rights. Most of the photographs on display are not iconic but instead provide an alternate view of familiar events. By presenting a broad and dynamic reading of the movement that pushed well past the 1963 March on Washington, the photographs challenge traditional timelines of the modern civil rights movement.<sup>17</sup> Lewis's images blur the line between leader and participant, challenging the traditional male-driven leadership so often associated with the movement.

The museum's main exhibit emphasizes African American agency in the face of slavery, racial violence, and Jim Crow while attempting to link the actions of the

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<sup>16</sup> Kelley, Blair L. M. "International Civil Rights Center and Museum." *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 3 (12, 2010): 753

<sup>17</sup> *ibid* 754

Greensboro Four to the greater Civil Rights Movement. Like the NCRM, this exhibition opens with slavery and highlights black activism throughout the nineteenth century. This section covers the violence of that era by profiling lynchings and Klu Klux Klan activity but oddly they offer no information about the lynching victims.<sup>18</sup> The preserved Woolworth's lunch counter is the most thoroughly developed section of the exhibition. The counter features a video that recreates what the sit-in was like from the protesters' point of view. From here the exhibit moves backward in time in a disjointed attempt to highlight black life and accomplishments. Through photographs and objects this space calls attention to the black church and black-owned businesses but the photographs and objects are almost completely without interpretation. The rest of the exhibit considers the Civil Rights Movement within the 1952-1968 timeline and features more well-known figures, events and stories. The most unfortunate and glaring omission of this exhibit is its failure to adequately profile the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. SNCC was established in Raleigh, North Carolina but grew out of the student-led sit-ins in Greensboro. ICRM struggled to connect the events in Greensboro to the larger movement and could have done so quite well had they given SNCC a more prominent place in the narrative. They also attempt to connect the Civil Rights Movement to other human rights efforts abroad but, like the BCRI, end up detracting rather than adding to the story. The discussion of global human rights initiatives and the panel on the election of President Barack Obama, which is framed as the culmination of the movement, fail to acknowledge remaining racial inequality and activism.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid* 755

<sup>19</sup> *ibid* 756

Though each of these museums differ slightly in their presentation it is clear that civil rights memorials and museums offer exclusionary and incomplete narratives of the Civil Rights Movement. This exclusion is a result of the growing consensus about what the movement was and who the protagonists were.<sup>20</sup> Women played important roles in many areas of the movement but the present narrative simply suggests, “men led, women organized.” The ICRM’s omission of the largely women-led SNCC reinforces this idea. Ella Baker and Diane Nash, important organizers in the organization, are featured in a display about women but there is no mention of their organizing activities or the central role female activism played in producing successful sit-ins, protests and the overall gains made in the movement in general.<sup>21</sup> The exclusion of women is also evident in the narrative treatment of Rosa Parks. She is nearly always presented as the first woman to refuse giving up her seat when in fact many, many women had done so before her. These women were beaten and jailed for their protest but activists refused to call attention to their stories because the women were not “respectable.” One woman fought her arrest violently; another was pregnant out of wedlock.<sup>22</sup> Rosa Parks was nonviolent, married, light skinned and “respectable,” and Montgomery activists felt white America would be comfortable enough with her to sympathize. This information and that of Parks’ prior activism against white male- on- black female rape is absent from the above institutions and public civil rights memory in general. The process of canonizing Martin Luther King, Jr. is slightly more complex.

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<sup>20</sup> Dwyer and Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials*, 7

<sup>21</sup> Kelley, “International Civil Rights Center and Museum,” 755

<sup>22</sup> Martin Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 120

Mass media has an “inclination to present social and political issues as conflicts between two—and usually no more than two—concrete interests or perspectives.”<sup>23</sup> Part of the key to sanitizing King was to pit him against himself and against Malcolm X. After Bloody Sunday, *Time* and *Newsweek* sympathized with King and condemned the blatantly racist and violent police officers. When he proceeded to plan more marches to Montgomery, those same magazines criticized him and resumed describing him as an agitator who was determined to create a crisis.<sup>24</sup> Against Malcolm X, King was considered a moderate who believed in a nonviolent solution to racial inequality. As King ventured into northern cities to protest economic and housing discrimination, the media criticized him for being aggressive and accused him of provoking two Chicago riots. The media dismissed King’s activism in the North because white Americans viewed (and still view) inner city problems as a function of free choice. The media’s dichotomous treatment of King has not changed. King’s critiques of economic structures did not fit the narrative and therefore are absent from King’s legacy and his memorialization in museums and memorials.<sup>25</sup> At the NCRI, King’s northern activism is highlighted but Malcolm X and other “dissenting” activism are not adequately discussed. These aspects of King’s activism are rarely mentioned, if at all, in other civil rights museums. The refusal to acknowledge different points of view within the movement places its public memory into three categories: one that legitimizes rather than challenges racist national institutions, one that ignores or makes invisible the critics of said institutions, and one that limits the public to cheering either for or against one or

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<sup>23</sup> Edward P. Morgan, “The Good, the Bad, and the Forgotten: Media Culture and Public Memory of the Civil Rights Movement,” *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 147

<sup>24</sup> *ibid* 149

<sup>25</sup> *ibid* 151

another conflicting sides.<sup>26</sup> This binary framework still exists in public memory today. Civil rights activists were juxtaposed against violent white Southerners, making no room for activism against institutionalized racism. Likewise, King's condemnation of capitalism, northern racism and the Vietnam War are largely left out of the narrative because they exist outside of the media's binary simplification. This limited view of King and the different schools of thought throughout the movement not only narrows our understanding but also aids in ignoring institutions and structures that continue to foster racial inequality today. The present narrative situates the movement in a way that upholds white supremacy because it has preserved the media interpretations of the movement since the 1960s.

The museums described above, and others specific to African American history, have made deliberate efforts to fight the "white hero, black victim" narrative but still produce narratives that uphold white supremacist storytelling. Historians Leigh Raiford and Martin Berger suggest that mass media sought spectacles of blackness, which would be disrupted if accompanied by contextual information.<sup>27</sup> In order to sustain a supremacist narrative, white media outlets chose to edit or omit certain photographs and events. Photographs that displayed resistance, strength and power were either not used at all, or altered to fit the narrative.<sup>28</sup> The ICRM successfully challenges this because its staff selected photographs of the movement that have otherwise been omitted. It does, however, fail in its portrayal of lynchings. In Berger's examination of "The Scourged Back," the famous daguerreotype of a former slave named Gordon, he notes that his biographical information

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid* 140

<sup>27</sup> Leigh Raiford. *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare*. (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 77

<sup>28</sup> Berger, *Seeing Through Race*, 36

has not often been shared with the image. Contrast this with the iconic image of a wounded white Civil War soldier; it is rarely displayed without the soldier's biography. Gordon's image, Berger argues, is frequently presented without context because his body in the moment captured on camera represents African Americans as a whole.<sup>29</sup> The ICRM recreates this spectacle by displaying lynching photographs without any information about the victims. The deliberate manipulation of the movement determined how it was viewed while it was happening and in turn shapes how America sees it today.

Perhaps what is most unfortunate about the above omissions is that it robs museums of the chance to tell more nuanced stories about the movement and its participants. None of the politically driven manipulation by the media was lost on civil rights activists. In fact, they recognized it and played to it in order to still relay their messages successfully. This media bias is one of the reasons King allowed children to participate in the marches, hoping that their presence would appeal to white guilt.<sup>30</sup> By comparison, Jewish and Holocaust museums typically do not struggle with this. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. is unapologetic in its depiction and indictment of American indifference yet it is one of the most visited museums in the city. It is easier for museum professionals to present, and for visitors to digest, controversial and uncomfortable information when the controversy is geographically far removed. It is harder and more uncomfortable to digest that kind of unflinching presentation of slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement because it happened at home.

The issues highlighted here are essentially the same issues with which museums have always struggled. American museums, and society as a whole, tend to glorify the

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<sup>29</sup> Berger, *Seeing Through Race*, 98

<sup>30</sup> *ibid* 77

individual, ignore female contributions and obscure the controversial subjects of race, sex and gender. That civil rights museums and memorials also struggle with this is no surprise. Part of the hesitance to cover controversial and sensitive topics is the desire to appeal to the general public and remain objective. The so-called general public is meant to be an inclusive term but instead excludes nearly anything that is not white, male and heteronormative. Many museums have in recent years come to realize that celebrating diversity makes for better exhibitions and more meaningful visitor experiences. Prominent museum professional Kathleen McLean has suggested that museums forgo attempting to be objective and boldly state their positions in exhibits.<sup>31</sup> Taking a stand may force the elephant to leave the room and allow museum professionals to create more nuanced, honest and complicated narratives. The danger of incomplete, “objective” narratives in this context is that museums exercise a presumed authority over the content they display. If these narratives are taken at face value, what social and political implications do they have for the future?

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<sup>31</sup> Kathleen McLean “Manifesto for the (r)Evolution of Museum Exhibitions. *Exhibitionist* 2010, 44

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