

The Public Historian
Exhibition and Museum Review Guidelines

All questions regarding review proposals, submissions, editing, and publication should be directed to: hist-publichistory@ucsb.edu

BACKGROUND:

The exhibit review section of *The Public Historian* was established to report on and evaluate current historical exhibitions, including performances, living history, and historical built environments. The journal reviews both exhibitions that receive wide public attention (e.g., those in large nationally known museums), and works in smaller institutions and other contexts, such as community or neighborhood centers. This section contains a mix of single item reviews and multi-item review essays, as well as thematic or comparative essays focusing on regions, special-interest audiences, or methodological issues. Review essays compare two or more exhibits or museums, treating the relevant subject in more depth than would be possible in a short review.

REVIEWING EXHIBITS:

In reviewing exhibits, it is especially important that reviewers understand and explain the intended purposes and audience of the exhibition and the institutional context in which it was produced (e.g., large or limited budget, availability of artifacts, time or other constraints imposed by the institution). Contact the exhibit curator to gather pertinent information on the exhibition's goals, its audience, and the conditions (budgetary, social, etc.) under which it was mounted.

- The review should briefly report on the exhibit (subject matter, main themes, form) as well as evaluate its effectiveness. Evaluation should take into consideration the accuracy of content and setting and the effectiveness of presentation and overall design (e.g., visual quality, conveyance of text, use of sound, and the meshing of these components). Please also evaluate the exhibition's accessibility to those with mobility and sensory impairments.
- Reviewers should consider other aspects of the exhibit, such as the use of experimental interpretive techniques and the role played by historians in the creation of the exhibit.
- Whenever possible, consider the exhibit in the larger context of scholarship in history and in museum interpretation. If a book or catalog was published to accompany the exhibit, that volume should be reviewed as well. In general, reviewers should bear in mind these questions:
 1. How does the exhibit take advantage of its format?
 2. Is the curator enhancing public knowledge and debate on the subject areas covered?
 3. What might other professionals learn from this effort?

Please avoid passive-voice constructions, overly complex sentences, jargon, and redundancies. We may return for revision any review in need of severe editing, and we reserve the right to reject any review submitted for publication.

All reviews are edited to conform to the *TPH* house style and standard literary usage to achieve greater economy of space and clarity of meaning. Please consult *The Chicago Manual of Style* for guidance.

FORMAT OF REVIEWS:

1. Please submit your review as a Microsoft Word document, and please use 12-pt. font and double-space the review.
2. Unless otherwise agreed upon between reviewer and editor, reviews should be about 1000 words long. We will shorten, or return for revision, any review of excessive length. Length guidelines vary in the case of review essays, but are generally 2000 words.
3. Provide the following information in your introductory heading: title of exhibit/museum; name of curator/historical consultant; sponsor/publisher; date of display/publication; and any further information that would help to identify or credit responsible parties. Please limit the heading to three full lines of text.

Heading:

The Whitney Plantation. John Cummings, Founder; Ibrahima Seck, Academic Director; Ashley Rogers, Director of Museum Operations. December 8, 2014 – Ongoing.
<http://www.whitneyplantation.com/>.

1. Images (provided by museum or created by reviewer) are strongly encouraged, and will be included whenever possible. Please supply images as electronic jpg or tiff files sized at 4" wide, with a minimum 300 dpi. Please do not place them directly in the text; instead, label your images by your last name (Smith image 1, etc.) and indicate image placement within the text. Use brackets: [Insert Smith image here]. Please provide image captions in a separate Word document.

Place files too large to e-mail in a Dropbox folder and invite the assistant reviews editor to share. All images must be accompanied by captions, credits, and a statement (letter or e-mail message) of permission from the holder of the copyright.

2. Your name and institutional affiliation should appear on a separate line at the end of your review.
3. *The Public Historian* uses the footnote style, spelling, and punctuation format of *The Chicago Manual of Style* and *The American Heritage Dictionary*.
4. E-mail your completed manuscript to hist-publichistory@ucsb.edu.
5. Once your manuscript has been submitted, you will receive an acknowledgement, then later a copy-edited version of the review. Please promptly approve or request changes in the typescript. Approximately one month before publication you will receive proofs e-mailed directly from UC Press. Please review and make any further changes within three days of receiving proofs and return to the managing editor at shcase@ucsb.edu.

NOTE: Please keep *TPH* up-to-date with your e-mail and affiliation.

Thank you for your contribution to *The Public Historian*.

SAMPLE REVIEW:

Many Voices, One Nation. Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, Washington, DC. *Fath Davis Ruffins*, Founding Project Director; *Nancy Davis*, Project Director; and the *Many Voices, One Nation* project team. June 28, 2017–Ongoing. <http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/many-voices-one-nation>.

American Democracy: A Great Leap of Faith. Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, Washington, DC. *Harry R. Rubenstein*, Project Director and Curator; *William L. Bird Jr.*, *Lisa Kathleen Graddy*, *Barbara Clark Smith*, and *Grace Cohen Grossman*, Curators. June 28, 2017–Ongoing. <http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/american-democracy-great-leap-faith>.

As white nationalists rallied around Confederate monuments and a presidential commission threatened to downsize the American electorate in the summer of 2017, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History (NMAH) opened two new exhibits that powerfully resonated with those headline-grabbing events. The exhibits, *Many Voices, One Nation* and *American Democracy: A Great Leap of Faith*, explore the history of two central components of American identity: social diversity and political democracy. Both exhibits are rich and engaging, make good use of recent scholarship, and speak directly to vital issues of our own day.

These two exhibits are part of a new cluster at NMAH titled *The Nation We Build Together*. Occupying the west wing of the museum's second floor, the cluster explores the relationship between core American ideals and lived experience over the course of American history. It includes these two new permanent exhibits along with a new temporary exhibit, *Religion in Early America*; an older permanent exhibit, *Within These Walls*; and a meeting and performance space called Wallace Coulter Unity Square. The expanded and updated *Within*

These Walls originally opened in 2001 and explores US history through the lives of those who occupied a single house in Ipswich, Massachusetts, from the 1770s into the 1960s. *Religion in Early America* demonstrates the dramatic diversity of religious belief that shaped early America, and Unity Square provides space for private reflection as well as public discussion of the issues raised by the exhibits. The cluster as a whole constitutes a clarion call to civic engagement.

The organization of *American Democracy*, which proceeds through five major sections, is clear and effective. The first section, titled “The Great Leap,” represents the founding of the US republic as a highly contested and world-historical break not only from Great Britain but also from the political and social hierarchies that had structured colonial—and all of European—life. It vividly communicates the breathtaking risk involved in renouncing monarchy and embracing government based on the consent of the governed. The second section, “A Vote, A Voice,” which narrates campaigns to extend or restrict the franchise from the founding of the republic to the present, demonstrates that the meaning of “consent of the governed” has always been a subject of intense struggle. The third section presents “The Machinery of Democracy,” a sometimes funny, other times sobering, and always engaging exploration of campaign and voting practices from the early republic through the age of television. “Beyond the Ballot” highlights ways that activists have sought to influence policy outside the polling place, emphasizing petition drives, lobbying, and street protests. The final section, “Creating Citizens,” takes on a host of issues: who has been admitted to US citizenship over time; how citizens have learned to *be* Americans; battles over who belongs in America; and how the United States has variously defined the rights and responsibilities of citizens.

Because this final section addresses the question of who belongs in the United States, it provides a terrific segue to *Many Voices, One Nation*. *Many Voices* has two clearly differentiated sections. One lines the exterior walls and tells a chronological story of migrations to North America from the first European explorations to the present. In the center is a separate section

with two parts. One is organized around three questions—who is free; who is included; who is equal—and the other identifies several sites where diverse peoples have met and negotiated their differences, where the many have at times allied, if not permanently become one. The spaces of negotiation considered here are the military, classrooms, sports, religion, and the workplace.

The overarching argument of *Many Voices* is that North America has always been home to diverse peoples; that those diverse peoples have from the beginning struggled over the terms of their relationships; and that the process of creating a single nation from these diverse peoples has involved subordination and violence as well as efforts toward inclusion and equality. Moreover, it maintains that the process of creating a nation from so many peoples is ongoing, a message that meshes perfectly with that of *American Democracy*, which insists that all Americans are part of a continuous discussion about the meaning of self-rule. Although each exhibit contains inspirational stories, the emphasis in both is on contention and contingency. There is little whiggishness here. There are instead stages in a profoundly meaningful struggle over the meaning of America.

Although the exhibits employ videos and touch screens to excellent effect, their brilliance lies in the selection and display of eye-catching artifacts accompanied by smart, clear commentary. The particular items or stories that carry special force will no doubt vary among viewers. In *American Democracy*, the magnificent press on which Benjamin Franklin trained as a printer packed an emotional and intellectual wallop for me not only because of the importance of print culture to the formation of the republic but also because of current attacks on the press by the executive branch of the federal government. Seeing in the same exhibit the writing desk on which Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence and the table on which Elizabeth Cady Stanton (and colleagues) drafted the Declaration of Sentiments brought home both the enduring nature of ideals laid down at the founding and their painfully narrow application in the opening act of US history. [Insert Muncy Image 1]

Every artifact is similarly replete with meaning and emotional impact. A yellow ribbon that proclaims “Under the 19th Amendment I cast my first vote Nov. 2nd, 1920” captures the exhilaration of winning inclusion in the process of self-rule. The worn-down heels of shoes worn by Juanita Williams in 1965 on the fifty-four-mile Selma march bespeak the determination and sacrifice required to win admission to the polls for most African Americans in the US South. Those shoes also signal limitations of the Nineteenth Amendment, which left millions of American women barred from the polls on bases other than sex. To its great credit, the exhibit does not flinch from current controversies: it draws attention to recent measures to restrict the vote and makes clear that we must all take sides in this perennial American struggle. Moreover, the ballot boxes and polling mechanisms used by Americans since the nineteenth century suggest some of the limits on democracy even among those with ready access to the franchise, as illustrated by, for instance, the lack of a secret ballot before the twentieth century and the hanging-chads controversy in the election of 2000. An extensive collection of posters and t-shirts from mass demonstrations shows just how broadly and effectively the right to public assembly has figured in recent US history. [Insert Muncy-Image 2] And, in a section on contests over the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, one of Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s typewriters effectively calls to mind contentions over the meaning of free speech, a right also embodied by the posters and t-shirts. Elsewhere, the exhibit juxtaposes a menorah featuring statues of liberty with the hood of a Ku Klux Klan uniform, powerfully evoking the persistent battle between those who have advocated a diverse citizenry and those who have preferred restriction.

The latter conflict runs through *Many Voices* as well. Synthesizing much recent scholarship on race, migration, and nation, this exhibit opens with the question, “How did we become us?” Entering *Many Voices*, a visitor walks along a wall of images picturing the diverse peoples who have inhabited North America and hears the voices of many different Americans,

speaking in several different languages, asking this question. From any place in the exhibit, one can hear these voices posing the exhibit's signature question.

The responding chronological narrative begins with the *unsettling* of North America by European empires that were competing for material resources and global dominance. Instead of starting the story on the Atlantic coast and moving westward as earlier exhibits might have done, the narrative starts with Spaniards meeting native peoples in what is now the southwestern United States and then moves eastward, concluding this first section of the exhibit in British Pennsylvania. Each case study in this section emphasizes diversity among all the groups meeting in North America, be they European migrants, indigenous peoples, or Africans forcibly brought to the continent. Picking up the story in the late eighteenth century, then, the exhibit opens a second section outlining the increasing diversity of North America between 1776 and 1900.

The stories in these first two sections emphasize conflict and negotiation, holding in tension the agency of all participants and the greater power of some. For instance, a ceiling bracket from the Pecos Mission Church in present-day New Mexico occasions the story of the Pueblo Revolt against the Spanish in 1680, which at first pushed the Spaniards out of the community and ultimately won concessions in labor and religious practices desired by native groups though not permanent freedom from Spanish overlordship. Evincing the interweaving of Spanish and Pueblo cultures, a salt cellar crafted in the seventeenth century by Zuni Indians features both Christian crosses and Zuni rainbows. Similarly, rice cultivation in colonial South Carolina is presented as an amalgamation of African knowledge and a European commitment to agricultural innovation.

The same themes of conflict, inequality, and negotiation play out in nineteenth-century stories. One notable westward pioneer was Frank McWorter, who in the early nineteenth century bought himself out of slavery in Kentucky and in the 1830s founded the interracial Illinois town of New Philadelphia. Chinese immigration to the American West is recalled by the pairing of a

tall, black board painted with gold Chinese letters and a huge forward-facing black wok. The twinning of these objects visually pops! [\[Insert Muncy Image 3\]](#) Experiences of Ygnacio and Isabel Del Valle, a Mexican family living in Southern California, illuminate the quandaries of annexation: with no movement on their own part, they found themselves living in the United States after the Mexican War (1848). While retaining their land, language, and religion, the Del Valles thrived in part by establishing effective relationships with Anglo-Americans. Story after story witnesses the processes by which diverse peoples temporarily established workable, if not just or equal, relationships in the expanding United States.

The last two chronological sections of *Many Voices* span the twentieth century, dividing it at 1965. Because the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 initiated a period of massive immigration to the United States from Asia, Africa, and the Americas, 1965 makes perfect sense as a watershed in this survey. Establishing 1900 as a pivotal moment, however, is more problematic as it sits right in the middle of an earlier period of massive immigration, which world war and federal legislation would shut down by the 1920s. Despite that quirk, the section on 1900–65 is fascinating as it spotlights constantly changing racial and ethnic enclaves in Chicago and Los Angeles. For the era since 1965, the story shifts to immigration in the US South, controversies at the US-Mexican border, and what is represented here as the emergence of transnationality. Given current debates, one of the most gripping items in the exhibit is a section of chain-link fence that in the twentieth century separated the Mexican city of Mexicali from the US city of Calexico. [\[Insert Muncy Image 4\]](#)

To teach more about that fence and other items in the two exhibits, the NMAH has generated accompanying materials. Extraordinary websites allow the curious to delve more deeply into issues and objects featured in the exhibits and make their riches available to those unable to reach DC. Each exhibit also offers a companion book, beautifully produced. In

American Democracy: A Great Leap of Faith, the curators expand on themes developed in their

exhibit, and *Many Voices, One Nation* includes essays by both museum curators and university scholars.¹ In a first, the NMAH will make free tours of the exhibits available in nine languages.

No work of historical scholarship can escape some critique. If I were to suggest revisions to the exhibits, I would first recommend attention to the Johnson-Reed immigration law of 1924. Neither exhibit spells out the provisions or effects of the 1924 law with its near ban on immigration from southern and eastern Europe and its complete ban on immigration from Asia. Reckoning with that restrictive law would clarify issues raised in both exhibits. I would also ask for qualifications of claims about women's suffrage. Both exhibits refer to American women winning the vote in 1920, even though millions of women had the vote before 1920 and millions still faced barriers to voting after 1920. Just a bit of rephrasing would illuminate that situation, with its profound implications for explaining political change. *Many Voices* might furthermore explicitly note that transnationality marked experience in North America long before the late twentieth century.

With no revision at all, however, these exhibits do profoundly important work. They are gripping intellectually and emotionally, and they provide crucial context and meaning for the most important issues faced by twenty-first-century Americans. They are a triumph of vivid, accessible, and civically engaged scholarship.

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¹ William L. Bird et al., *American Democracy: A Great Leap of Faith* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2017); Margaret Salazar-Porzio and Joan Fragaszy Troyano, eds., *Many Voices, One Nation: Material Culture Reflections on Race and Migration in the United States* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2017).