POST-POSTRACIAL AMERICA
On *Westworld* and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

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*Abstract* A seismic shift in the racial landscape of the United States occurred in 2016. The prevailing discourse about a "postracial America," though always, in the words of Catherine Squires a "mystique," was firmly and finally extinguished with the election of Donald J. Trump. Race, in the form of racial prejudice, erupted in Trump’s political rhetoric and in the rhetoric of his supporters. At the same time, the continued significance and consequences of racial division in America were also being asserted for politically progressive ends by the increasingly prominent #blacklivesmatter movement and by the newly opened National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall in Washington, DC, not far from the White House. This article tracks the resurgence of race in the US cultural landscape against the racially depoliticized myth of the "postracial" by focusing first on the HBO television series *Westworld*, which epitomizes that logic. The museum, which opened its doors against the backdrop of the presidential campaign, lodges a scathing critique of the very notion of the postracial; in fact, it signals the return of race as an urgent topic of national discussion. Part of the work of the museum is to *materialize* race, to move race and white supremacy to the center of the American national narrative. This article points to the way the museum creates what Jacques Rancière calls “dissensus,” and thus becomes a site of possibility for politics. The museum, in its very presence on the Mall, its provocative display strategies, and its narrative that highlights profound contradictions in the very meaning of America, intervenes in what Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible” and thus creates the conditions for reconfiguring the social order. In part, it achieves this by racializing white visitors, forcing them to feel their own race in uncomfortable ways. The article suggests that this museum, and the broader emerging discourse about race in both film and television, offers new ways to think about the political work of culture.
Keywords postracial, dissensus, whiteness, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Westworld

In the lead-up to the 2008 election, the public discourse surrounding Barack Obama, and what his candidacy heralded, included visions of a postracial America. The very fact that America, despite its legacy of systematic racial oppression, could elect an African American surely meant that race could no longer be identified as a powerful social force. Indeed, during the Obama years this notion of a postracial America gained traction in mass culture. The increasingly diverse casts in films and on television shows led some to dismiss the continued salience of race as a significant or meaningful social factor. However, the idea of the postracial was, in the words of Catherine Squires (2014), only ever a “mystique.” In fact, the celebration of the postracial served a conservative agenda, emboldening those who sought to undo affirmative action, end voting rights protection, and so forth. Nothing, however, revealed the illusory nature of the “postracial” more than the election of Donald J. Trump in the fall of 2016. Race, in the form of racial prejudice, erupted in Trump’s political rhetoric and in the rhetoric of his supporters. But it was not only on the political right that race was being spoken; at the same time, the implications of racial inequality and white supremacy were also being voiced by the increasingly prominent #blacklivesmatter movement in response to the epidemic of unarmed black men killed by police officers.

This article argues that we are witnessing a reemergence of race as a socially and politically significant discourse, and that this discourse is appearing largely in the arena of culture. I track the resurgence of this discourse about race in the US cultural landscape, against what had been a hegemonic discourse about a postracial America. To do this, I begin with the HBO television series Westworld (2016–), a popular cultural text and an example of postracial ideology par excellence in its refusal to speak race even as it advances racist or racialized stereotypes.

The main work of the present article, however, is to point to how the discourse of the postracial is now coming under attack, quite visibly in the institutionalization of a fundamentally different narrative at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which opened its doors also in the fall of 2016. While this museum has been in the works for decades, the specific form it takes, and the logic guiding its exhibition and display strategies, reflects the current urgency to speak race and to put it at the heart of both American history and American politics. In this article, I examine the museum’s display strategies, its unique strategies for producing what Jacques Rancière calls “dissensus,” a precondition for the possibility of politics. The museum achieves this effect by racializing white visitors, forcing them to feel their own race in uncomfortable ways. The article suggests that this museum, and the broader discourse about race that it institutionalizes, offers new ways to think about the political work of culture.

What Is the Postracial Mystique?

Westworld and the Invisibility of Racism

What makes this resurgence of discourse about race notable is that it emerges against a pervasive narrative of America as postracial. In recent years, this postracial ideology has been widely disseminated by mass culture. During the Obama era, the casts of films and television do seem to have become more diverse, tacitly
affirming a vision of a multicultural society in which racial differences are insignificant; importantly, race itself often remained unremarked on in the shows’ narratives. *Westworld* is an instructive example. Based on Michael Crichton’s 1973 film, this science fiction series revolves around a theme park staffed by androids, called hosts, and visited by paying guests who want to experience the “Old West.” The action of the show moves between the underground world of the scientists and tech workers who design, program, and repair the hosts, and the aboveground theme park, *Westworld*, where guests pay large sums of money to pursue the raw adventures of the American West, as imagined in the Hollywood western. The critical attention the show has garnered has focused on three main topics: first, its central philosophical question of whether androids can, in fact, become human; second, its complicated temporal schema, in which plotlines from three discrete periods are interspersed without any indication to viewers; and third, its genre-bending hybrid of the western and science fiction. What draws me to *Westworld*, however, and its relevance for this analysis, is the way it constructs a world in which race seems not to matter, goes entirely unmentioned, even as racial stereotypes and hierarchies are embedded in the show’s narrative and aesthetics. As such, *Westworld* is decidedly apolitical, participating in precisely the kind of numbing consensus that Rancière contends blocks true democracy and politics.

*Westworld* poses as postracial because race, as signified by the skin color of bodies, goes unnoted within the diegesis of the show. The cast is not primarily white, and nonwhite actors are not marginalized in terms of screen time or centrality to the show’s narrative. Neither does the topic of race motivate any of the plotlines. Hosts are black, white, Latino, and Asian, and the same diversity characterizes the scientists, technicians, and programmers. Yet race is a covert presence throughout. Furthermore, the way the show presents bodies reveals a racial logic; there are vast discrepancies between how white bodies and black bodies are treated. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the black body is fetishized in *Westworld*. There is a particularly uncomfortable moment in episode 5, in which a black host named Bart has been sent to the behavior lab because he was encountering technical difficulties; like other hosts in this area, he is nude. Elsie, a white behavioral specialist, turns to him, and as she does his penis comes into view. In a joking, off-handed way she says to the nonresponsive host that if he does not stop pouring alcohol on the guests, “I’m going to have to reassign you to a narrative where your . . . talents . . . will go tragically to waste.” The show, in this moment, unreflexively references stereotypes about race, and black virility, instrumentalizing, as it does again and again, black bodies in the service of white ones.

Nudity seems also to be unevenly distributed among black and white bodies. In the underground labs, virtually all the hosts are naked; their nudity, one might argue, is meant to enhance their dehumanization. Yet some characters are filmed naked much more extensively than others. A comparison of the two primary female hosts, Dolores and Maeve, is revealing. Though hosts are understood to be androids, they are played by actors; the actor playing Dolores, Evan Rachel Wood, is white. Maeve, by contrast, is played by the mixed-race, British actor Thandie Newton. Although Dolores does appear naked, she is always seated and mostly...
shot from the chest up. Maeve, however, appears nude with increasing frequency as the series unfolds. Her nakedness is on full display.

There is also a deep racism underlying the different storylines created for Dolores and Maeve at the park. The opening image in the pilot episode features Dolores, sitting in a chair. She is naked, but because the room is dark, and because her long hair falls in front of her chest, she is not completely exposed. A voice speaks to her, and she responds. The conversation is a voice-over, and the visuals depict her waking up and descending the stairs of an old farmhouse dressed in a long, blue prairie-style dress; she appears wholesome, well-scrubbed, her long blond hair pulled off her face but cascading down her back. This is the start of each day in her storyline, a plot that plays on a repeating loop: she wakes, goes downstairs, speaks with her father on the porch, and then heads off. She responds to the voice’s question “Tell us what you think of your world” with her stock, programmed response, “Some people choose to see the ugliness in this world. The disarray. I choose to see the beauty.”

We meet Maeve moments later, when Teddy, a host whose storyline ties him romantically to Dolores, enters a saloon and is propositioned by the host-whore, Clementine. In rebuffing Clementine’s offer, Teddy establishes his integrity: “I’d rather earn a woman’s affection than pay for it.” As he says this, the camera pulls back to reveal Maeve, the madame of the whorehouse, standing beside him at the bar. “You’re always paying for it, darling,” she says to him. “The difference is our costs are fixed and posted right there on the door.” Unlike Dolores, who is innocent and idealistic, Maeve is cynical, snarky—and a whore (fig. 1). Uninterested in either Maeve or Clementine, Teddy is drawn to Dolores, whom he sees outside the saloon window. He leaves the saloon to follow her, and they engage in their prescribed exchange whereby he picks up a can she has dropped. “You came back,” she says. “I told you I would,” he replies, and then offers to “see her home.” And he does, as they ride off together. While their narratives offer them the freedom to roam the idyllic, sweeping, western landscapes at will, Maeve’s narrative ties her exclusively to the whorehouse in town.

Dolores is part of a nuclear family; she lives with her father who loves and protects her. Her storyline in the park is also inflected by notions of true love and
romance. She fervently believes that one day she and Teddy will be together. She does not work for a living but wanders the park at will, shops in town, or engages in painting, which is her hobby. Maeve, by contrast, has a storyline with no family; she is jaded and cynical, and she works for a living.

Perhaps the most important difference in the way Dolores and Maeve are imagined is that from the very start Dolores, and not Maeve, is the host being coached into consciousness, and by extension humanity. In the opening moments of the very first episode, as we are introduced to her storyline, we are also introduced to the idea that she might be engaged in some form of thinking beyond her programming: a voice asks, “Have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?” This voice, we learn, is Arnold, her original programmer. Over the course of the series we learn that Arnold had a theory about consciousness: that it is a journey inward. And indeed, by the final episode, Dolores hears her own voice and realizes that it was the voice Arnold had been pushing her to hear all along.

This journey, though, is not for Maeve. The programmers have little interest in her consciousness, seeming instead to fret over why she is no longer able to attract johns. To “fix” that problem, they increase her aggression and her acuity. Nevertheless, Maeve seems to be developing as well. She has memories, and a pain in her side, and can no longer tolerate the situation in the park. She decides she has to escape, so she puts together a resistance team, and in the final episode, they launch their plan. She believes that she has taught herself to wake at will, and with this skill, she wakes herself up in the lab; she and her crew undertake a bloody attack on the technicians. Maeve is no longer naked, but dressed in a navy outfit resembling a uniform; she seems powerful and to be calling the shots. However, one technician shows Maeve the keyboard control: she was programmed to be able to wake herself from sleep, and even more discouraging, she was programmed to rebel. Bernard, the head of programming, tells her that someone altered her storyline and that what she thinks are her own decisions were all pre-scripted. By the end of season 1, Dolores has achieved consciousness, but we are not so sure about Maeve. Maeve is on the verge of escaping from Westworld; it might be the case that she, too, has moved toward humanity, has gone off script, as it were. But the show has taken little interest in her psychical and emotional development, relishing instead her “bad-ass” attitude. Most important, for the black woman, the issue of consciousness has never really been on the table. It is only the characters played by white actors who are imagined to have limitless potential.

Under the guise of being race neutral, or multicultural, the show tacitly affirms white supremacist ideologies, perpetuates stereotypes about the locus of black women’s worth, and perhaps most distressingly reserves consciousness and humanity for those with white skin. This racial hierarchizing is only underscored by the fact that Bernard, too, the other black main character, is also revealed to be a host. White audiences are invited to indulge in these ideologies under the cover of postracial discourse. Westworld was celebrated as groundbreaking, thoughtful, and edgy. Nevertheless, its participation in postracial discourse—as evidenced both by its diverse cast and by its refusal to speak race—works to provide cover for racism. Indeed, its silence about race
and racial hierarchies makes a political response to racism virtually impossible.

**Race Matters**

Season 1 of *Westworld* might very well represent the last gasp of the discourse of the postracial in the cultural arena. I suspect that by the time season 2 airs, it will thematize the issue of race in the way that many contemporary television shows have begun to—including *Dear White People* (Netflix, 2017–), *Atlanta* (FX, 2016–), *Insecure* (HBO, 2016–), *This Is Us* (NBC, 2016–), and *Blackish* (ABC, 2014–), just to name a few of the most notable. In the era of Trump, on the one hand, and #blacklivesmatter on the other, America has entered the post postracial. What I want to argue here is that what we are witnessing in America right now is a rematerialization of race, one that has happened on both the political left and the political right. Trump has followed up the incendiary claims he made during his campaign (accusing a Mexican judge of bias, targeting Muslims, stating that black Americans are living in hell) by making appointments and enacting policy that further his racial ideology. According to the *Huffington Post*, there were over nine hundred hate incidents in the United States in the ten days after his election, and in 40 percent of those, Trump’s name or campaign slogans were invoked (O’Connor and Marans 2017). In January 2017, days before the inauguration, Trump lashed out at Democratic congressman John Lewis, a revered figure on both sides of the aisle, for his involvement in the civil rights movement: Trump tweeted, “Congressman John Lewis should spend more time on fixing and helping his district, which is in horrible shape and falling apart (not to mention crime infested) rather than falsely complaining about the election results . . . All talk, talk, talk—no action or results. Sad!” (Alcindor 2017). Trump’s ignorance of black history was further revealed during his Black History Month breakfast at the White House, when he seemed to suggest that Frederick Douglass, the nineteenth-century slave-turned-abolitionist, was alive and well: “Frederick Douglass is an example of somebody who’s done an amazing job and is getting recognized more and more, I notice” (Wootsen 2017). Perhaps the clearest indication to date that Trump has fostered a resurgence in racism came in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 13, 2017, when armed white nationalists felt emboldened to protest the removal of a Confederate statue, and Trump responded to their clashes with counter-protesters, one of whom was killed, by saying that there was “blame on both sides” (Shear and Haberman 2017).

If the postracial discourse prevents discussion and activism about racial inequality in the United States, tacitly reinforcing racial hierarchies, then perhaps the reemergence of discourse about race on both the right and left becomes an opportunity for politics, in the way Rancière has articulated. For Rancière, politics is the antithesis to government proper, to an established system of ruling, which he refers to as the *arkhe*. “Politics,” he writes, “is a specific break with the logic of *arkhe*” (Rancière 2010: 30). Established systems of rule are instruments of consensus, and consensus is the enemy of true democracy. Indeed, “demos,” he writes, “is the name of a part of a community . . . simply the people who do not count, who have no entitlement to exercise the power of the *arkhe*” (32). In other words, “To be of the *demos* is to be outside of the count, to have no speech to be heard” (32). Those most radically disenfranchised, then, are the true subjects of true democracy.
of democracy, “the supplementary part in relation to every count of the parts of the population” (33). He further clarifies this by saying that there are two ways of counting the parts of community—the first, in his words, “counts real parts only—actual groups defined by differences in birth, and by the different functions, places and interests that make up the social body to the exclusion of every supplement,” and he calls this “the police” (36). This portion are those who are socially visible, those who can be seen and speak within the existing order. The second way of counting counts precisely those who do not have a part; this way of counting is politics (36).

So, for Rancière, politics is brought into being in contradistinction to the police, by which he means the existing social order. Politics takes the form of “an intervention in the visible and the sayable” (37). This leads Rancière to a central claim: that “the essence of politics is dissensus,” which is not simply a confrontation between different interests, but something much more fundamental: “It is the demonstration of a gap in the sensible itself” (38), a gap in what can be seen and heard. In other words, political demonstration brings into visibility precisely that which previously had no reason to be seen, that which lacked legibility; political demonstration “places one world in another” (38).

We see “politics” in precisely this sense in the #blacklivesmatter movement, which I touch on briefly, and also in the case I am considering at length, the National Museum of African American History and Culture. I argue that the museum performs precisely such a political demonstration, on both a micro and a macro level. As I show, the museum creates the conditions for a political argument: “Political argumentation is at one and the same time the demonstration of a possible world in which the argument could count as an argument, one that is addressed by a subject qualified to argue, over an identified object, to an addressee who is required to see the object and to hear the argument that he ‘normally’ has no reason either to see or to hear. It is the construction of a paradoxical world that puts together two separate worlds” (39, emphasis added).

What the museum does in fact, as I hope to illustrate shortly, is create dissensus by forcing into visibility a series of paradoxes about race in America. It puts the historical narrative in which racial difference and state violence against first Africans and then African Americans is the basis for America today, together with the narrative of a postracial America based on the principles of equality, liberty, and justice for all. But of course, this is the paradox, as the two narratives cannot exist side by side. In putting these “two separate worlds” together—a world that is, as yet, at odds with, or not fully seeable or sayable, outside the museum—their mutual incompatibility comes into focus.

Rancière identifies the existing distribution of the sensible, the prevailing social order with the “police,” with all that term’s resonances, and which for him is at odds with politics. It is at the hands of the police that African Americans are the victims of state violence. Under the current distribution of the sensible, these deaths are unsayable, not legible, as murder. One police officer after another is exonerated for the murder of young African Americans. It was in response to this spate of deaths of African Americans at the hands of the “police,” both in Rancière’s sense of a particular prevailing social order and in the literal sense of law enforcement agents, that a political argument—an assertion that black lives matter—was made sayable by the thousands of
protesters who filled the streets after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of Trayvon Martin. The #blacklivesmatter, created in 2012, sought to “broaden[] the conversation around state violence to include all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state. We are talking about the ways in which Black lives are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity” (Black Lives Matter 2013). In protests on the streets, and through grassroots mobilizations, the movement seeks to disrupt the veneer of a postracial America, literally making visible and sayable state violence against black people. In a piece for the New Labor Forum, Russell Rickford has argued that Black Lives Matter has been able to advocate radical politics in a way that was profoundly difficult during Obama’s tenure, when postracial discourse was hegemonic: “Black Lives Matter has evolved into a potent alternative to the political paralysis and isolation that racial justice proponents have faced since the election of Obama” (2016, 25.1:35). Unlike other contemporary grassroots political organization, such as MoveOn.org, Black Lives Matter is not a digital campaign; Black Lives Matter seeks to get bodies out in the streets; it is an attempt to call attention to black bodies by putting bodies into public view. Writes Rickford, “Their mainstay has been occupation—of highways, intersections, sporting events, retail stores, malls, campaign events, police stations, and municipal buildings” (2016, 25.1:36). Indeed, this movement is about visibility—as opposed to the presumed invisibility of blackness—under the postracial gaze, an instance of placing one world in another, creating the conditions under which someone might hear an argument that they could not previously hear.

Making visible this state violence against African Americans, in part by naming those killed, creates a new form of visibility, what in Rancière’s terms might be rendering a condition newly seeable and sayable. In a discussion in September 2016 between a staff writer for the Washington Post, Krissah Thompson, the cocreator of the District Black Lives Matter group, Erika Totten, and the SNCC Legacy Project member Courtland Cox, Cox compared the conditions those in the civil rights movement were fighting against to those facing the Black Lives Matter group. For her part, Totten asserted that the goal of Black Lives Matter is to expose racial violence and injustice. She endorsed actions on the street, but she also argued that social media can serve as a powerful tool: it is “similar to the legacy of Ida B. Wells . . . exposing on a grand stage what is happening to us” (Thompson, Totten, and Cox 2016). Thompson asked them both about their thoughts on the impending opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and both were hopeful that it would lend visibility to the black experience. For Totten, the possibilities were heady: “To be able to walk into a space that is expansive and intentional, thoughtful that really talks about our history of being black in this country, it’s really important. . . . It’s really powerful” (Thompson, Totten, and Cox 2016).

The National Museum of African American History and Culture: Staging an Argument

Although race has become a topic of debate for politicians and activists, the issue is often engaged more forcefully, and with greater traction, in the arena of culture. The newly opened National Museum of African American History and Culture, I argue, is itself a voice in this debate, occupying, as it does, a prominent
position on the National Mall, between the Washington Monument and the American History Museum, and in the immediate vicinity of the White House. Although the idea for the museum is more than one hundred years old, I argue that the shape it has taken—the architecture, exhibit design, historical narrative—is directly connected to racial politics in the present. At almost every turn, the museum, I suggest, functions to debunk the idea of the postracial; on the one hand, it advances a historical narrative in which the United States is a nation built on the exploitation of racial difference, and on the other, it fosters a museum experience in which all viewers feel their race. While black people in America do not have the option of racial invisibility, white people in America do. But in this museum, white visitors cannot help but feel their whiteness, an experience that is profoundly uncomfortable in this context. The museum thus creates the occasion for white people to confront the violence that whites, and white supremacy, have inflicted on blacks. That this experience is political, in the sense that Rancière describes, has to do with the fact that what happens in the museum happens in public; black people and white people experience this museum together and apart, but in relation to one another.

To uncover the political work done by this history museum, I want to focus on its particular mode of address to visitors, the kinds of confrontations, provocations, and political arguments it initiates. Dissensus, Rancière argues, can be provoked aesthetically by intervening in the “distribution of the sensible,” which “defines what is visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language” (2004: 12–13). There is, in other words, a politics to aesthetic forms, and “an ‘aesthetics’ at the core of politics.” Aesthetics, here, is “a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (13). Rancière is in effect claiming a privileged place for aesthetic innovation, as it is through “aesthetic practices” that new formal arrangements in the social world become visible and thinkable. The aesthetic realm is thus a privileged arena for the political.

It is therefore incumbent in an analysis like this one to pay close attention to the museum’s aesthetic gestures, its architecture and design. The building itself stands in stark opposition to the other museums on the Mall—which are white or slate, largely in the neoclassical style. This one, designed by David Adjaye, a British architect born in Tanzania to Ghanaian parents, is visually striking (fig. 2). The exterior is an ornately carved, bronze-colored, metal lattice intended as an homage to the kind of intricate ironwork produced by enslaved African Americans in Louisiana and South Carolina (National Museum of African American History and Culture 2016). Although the design itself is graceful, evoking the three-tiered crowns used in Yoruban art (National Museum of African American History and Culture 2016), Adjaye wanted the museum to be a “punch,” coming as it does at the “end of the row of palaces,” not simply a “stone box with things in it” (Shin 2016). The point here is not simply that the museum’s exterior is dark, in contrast to the other Smithsonian buildings, but that in being dark, it rejects the hegemonic architectural style and look of the Mall and with it, as I show, the
hegemonic national narrative. Indeed, in referring to it as a “punch,” Adjaye is registering his hope that the museum might itself be disruptive, perhaps even combative, in this way. Furthermore, the architectural style of this museum, and also that of the other outlier, the National Museum of the American Indian, makes the whiteness of the neoclassical architecture visible.

The internal architecture and strategies of display have a powerful symbolic dimension as well. The three floors of history galleries, which are by all measure the true heart of the museum, are subterranean. There is of course a logic to the building’s organization, with the history floors below ground and the culture floors above. The visitor’s journey begins with a descent. From the entrance level, visitors ride down a long, steep escalator. At the bottom, a snaking queue forms for the transport elevator, which performs the final descent and which can accommodate only about forty visitors at a time. The wait increases anticipation but also fosters a sense of dread, as the visitor knows that what follows will not be comfortable. When one is finally ushered into the crowded elevator, not knowing quite what to expect, the elevator operator explains that in addition to journeying down, the journey is also back in time. As the glass elevator descends, the years, printed on the walls of the elevator shaft, flash by: 1985, 1968, 1800, 1400. The elevator doors open onto a dimly lit gallery, so dim it takes several moments for the eyes to adjust. The ceilings are very low, and there are display cases on both sides. Visitors are elbow to elbow with other museumgoers. The narrative begins in 1400, with displays on one side addressing historical developments in Europe and, on the other, developments in Africa. The very first placard announces, “Slavery became based on perceptions of race. Enslaved people were considered property and dehumanized. Slavery was an inherited status and passed down through the generations. Slavery was for life.” Over the course of this first floor, visitors are drawn into the story of how, exactly, this happened.

Visitors are quiet, and as they move toward the end of the first gallery, the sound of crashing waves begins to fill the room (fig. 3). On a large video screen, black-and-white images of waves crashing on rocks fade into images of maps and trade routes. The screen is mounted on a floor-to-ceiling wall, the Hall of Slave Ships, on which is inscribed the names of every known slave ship, along with the dates of the voyages, the initial cargo (the number of Africans at departure) and the cargo at arrival (the number of Africans who survived the voyage). The sheer scale of the Middle Passage comes into view as one realizes that this wall of slave ships runs the entire length of the museum, through multiple galleries. Adjacent to this room, a wooden walkway, meant to evoke “the long, rugged slave ramp along which captives were marched from the mainland down to the shoreline” (Ruane 2016) in Mozambique leads visitors in a loop around the remains of the Sao Jose, a slave ship that went down at sea. This room is even darker, and voice-overs reading slave narratives fill the darkness; the accounts, read by African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans, explain that many slaves jumped overboard, into the sea, to escape their fate. On either side of the walkway, over the railing, are huge ballasts—human cargo was light, even when Africans were laid one on top of another, in comparison to other types of cargo.

This room, like the rest of the exhibition, is not experiential in the sense of
enabling some kind of reenactment. One does not enter a slave ship, or even the likeness of a slave ship; the experience is not literal. Yet it is both evocative and provocative. It is meant to destabilize.

Elsewhere I have described the museal strategies that produce “prosthetic memories” (Landsberg 2004) in viewers—memories of events that one did not live through yet to which, after an experiential
engagement with a representation of a past event, one feels a personal, affective connection. I have argued that prosthetic memories are most productive when one is brought into proximity to a past event, but not through simple identification with past historical actors. At the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), for example, when one is confronted with the room full of shoes, one is brought into contact with the enormity of what happened. The visitor sees the shoes that survived while their owners did not, and at the same time feels her own shoes on her feet. The Holocaust can never be our experience, yet in engaging with the room full of shoes, the visitor has had an experience in connection to the Holocaust and its victims, an experience that feels meaningful. Because the Holocaust did not happen here, in the United States, it is not an American story. Although the USHMM does include a critique of the United States’ refusal to take in Jewish refugees, Americans themselves are not implicated in the critique. Jews and non-Jews are invited to engage with the Jewish experience, to see as if through Jewish eyes. The context of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, an American museum designed largely for an American audience, is quite different. As Lonnie Bunch, the curator, has said repeatedly, American visitors, whether they are white or black, are to feel that this is their story. This museum forces white visitors to own uncomfortable memories of American whiteness and the violence American whiteness has inflicted. By reframing the history of the United States with race at the center of the narrative, the museum forces visitors to reconsider America and what it stands for. The memories mobilized by the museum are politically important in that they work
to break through and unmask the everyday reality of racial oppression in the present. This version of American history, in other words, is in stark opposition to the whitewashed myth of the west advanced by *Westworld*. In Bunch’s words, even if you’re white, “the story of slavery is still your story” (Capehart 2016). White visitors to the museum cannot help but feel their whiteness and what it has wrought both historically and now.

The mode of address here is not “looking as if through black eyes.” The narrative and display strategies do not aim to elicit white visitors’ sympathy—or even empathy—for African Americans. Instead, the museum, again and again, in its historical narrative and in its exhibition design, attempts to produce *dissensus*; it does this both through cognitive dissonance and through affective dissonance.

It aims to disrupt hierarchies and established narratives—primarily the narrative of America as a nation founded on principles of equality and freedom. After the Middle Passage, the story shifts to the eighteenth century and the process through which slavery became racialized (based on African descent), hereditary, and lifelong. As a placard spells out, “Africans became black in colonial North America.” The historical narrative reveals that the United States is fundamentally a nation built on the logics and economics of racial difference. This careful, historical unfolding forces the visitor to consider what her own whiteness has prevented her from seeing or hearing.

The real contradiction emerges forcefully as the narrative of the American Revolution is rescripted. On an enormous screen, the size of an entire wall, a video, narrated by an African American, explains...
that African Americans watched with interest in 1776 as the colonists fought the British for their freedom. As political actors, African Americans strategically fought for whoever promised them freedom. This little room recasts the triumphalist narrative of a War for Independence in the context of a slave nation where unfairness was the law.

This central paradox is dramatically underscored by the next room. Visitors exit what has thus far been crowded exhibit space—a small warren of congested, low-ceilinged rooms—and enter, with a sense of relief, into a large hall, three stories high (fig. 4). Straight ahead, the visitor is greeted by a life-size statue of Thomas Jefferson and might imagine that a familiar, patriotic narrative awaits. But this expectation is thwarted. Beneath Jefferson, in gold lettering, the caption reads “The Paradoxes of Liberty.” In gold lettering on the wall behind him a passage from the Declaration of Independence reads: “All men are created equal . . . With certain inalienable rights . . . Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it.” At this point in the exhibition, visitors are forced to pair the conventional narrative of American freedom from tyranny with the reality of racial oppression and violence on which the new nation will be founded. Behind Jefferson are bricks or blocks, each one engraved with the name of one of his slaves. The change in exhibition space, coupled with the inversions and emphasis on hypocrisy, I would argue, function almost like a punch; as a powerful intervention into the distribution of the sensible, the exhibition display and narrative generate dissensus, which is the grounds for an urgently needed political intervention.

The “race work” done by this museum is in large part dependent on the collective nature of the museum-going experience. While there are other

Figure 4 “Paradox of Liberty” tableau
museums on the Mall that draw a diverse crowd, one cannot help but feel one’s race in this one. As a white person, one’s experience is in part mediated—or triangulated—through the experience of the black museumgoers with whom one walks side by side. Almost all the dozens of articles that appeared in the Washington Post about the opening of the museum mention the heady experience of being there as a black person: Blair L. M. Kelley, an associate professor of history at North Carolina State University, describes her experience as a black citizen: “It was personally edifying. . . . It felt like my ancestors, who were brought to this land decades before the nation’s founding, had come home. No longer just a few things in a room on the side, no longer just mentioned outside the plantation house, no longer the whispered-about laborers or servants, they had a place” (Kelley 2016). Roy Meyers, a retired advertising executive, was visiting from Georgia: “This museum is incredible . . . because in many cases, as we know, the story has not been passed to the younger ones. It’s a difficult subject to talk about in any meaningful way. This museum is going to open up another side of it” (Hesse and Thompson 2016). Sonya Patterson, a grandmother escorting three generations to the museum, said, “I am here representing all of the ancestors before me” (Hesse and Thompson 2016). So on the one hand, being there as a white person among black people for whom the experience feels like a pilgrimage decenters one’s own experience. Visitors need to be respectful of someone else’s space—both literally and metaphorically—as they navigate the rooms together. Being confronted visually and aurally with the material traces of white-on-black violence and hatred, while in the presence of African Americans whose ancestors experienced—and who may themselves have experienced—that violence makes one hyperaware of one’s race as a white person and has a shaming effect. Again, it is not just that the narrative makes visible the centrality of racial oppression and violence to the construction, formation, and prosperity of the United States, but that white visitors are confronted with the costs of that history while in the presence of African Americans. One cannot hide one’s whiteness or hide behind it. It is in this way that the museum forces white visitors to accept their own complicity, to feel the shame of their own white privilege, while in the company of African Americans. That discomfort is palpable, embodied, and profoundly racial. While black people in America feel their race every day, white people have the luxury of racial invisibility. Racializing white visitors—not by letting them see through black eyes as much as forcing them to accept their own whiteness and the role whiteness has played historically in the formation of the nation—is yet another way in which this museum generates dissensus.

While I cannot discuss in such detail the rest of the history galleries—those that address the internal slave trade and slave auctions, abolitionism, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the civil rights movement—I do want to consider what many people take to be the heart of the museum: the chapel that holds Emmett Till’s casket. This is by far the most affectively charged space in the museum. Often there is a long line to enter the room—one of my visits the wait was about an hour (fig. 5). The room is small, and no photographs are allowed. The music playing is the gospel music that was played at Till’s funeral. Here the museum does deploy an experiential strategy, as viewers themselves participate in the act of paying respects to Till,
the fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 for speaking to a white woman. Till’s body was mutilated beyond recognition, and when it was returned to his mother in Chicago, she decided that she would have an open casket so the world could see what they did to her boy. I would argue that his open casket was in fact a moment of dissensus—Jet magazine published those images, and they had a seismic effect on the political landscape of the country. Till’s original coffin sits on a raised platform along the back wall of the room. On either side are quotations, the one on the right from his mother, Mamie Till, and the one on the left from Rosa Parks. Both speak to the political nature of this decision to show the world his disfigured body. The words of his mother drive home this point: “Two months ago I had a nice six-room apartment in Chicago. I had a good job. I had a son. When something happened to Negroes in the South, I said, ‘That’s their business, not mine.’ Now I know how wrong I was. The death of my son has shown me that what happens to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of all of us.” And indeed, this is the message—that what happened to Emmett Till is all of our business. As a white person, the emotions are complicated: it almost feels as though one is trespassing in a very intimate family space. There is an overwhelming sense of guilt and complicity, especially in the presence of African Americans in this chapel. But the experience also illustrates how powerful dissensus can be in changing the course of history, as evidenced by the large-scale response to Till’s murder. Furthermore, visitors are meant to connect this dead African American boy’s body to the present day epidemic of murders of young African American men by police officers.

This museum makes all visitors wear their race, which is indeed a powerful rebuttal to the discourse of the postracial.
Indeed, in its recounting of recent history, the museum points to the salience of race in contemporary America. As one moves up from floor to floor, one encounters cinema-sized video screens and sitting areas. In the final video, Ta-Nehisi Coates, John Lewis, and others discuss how to dismantle white privilege. In an article for the *Washington Post*, Lewis (2016) explains,

People know so little about African American history. We want to try to hide nearly 400 years of history from ourselves, as though it will somehow disappear if we never mention it. But all around us we see pockets of the past erupting before our very eyes. . . . Some people thought that the hostility and angst around issues of race, for example, no longer existed in America, to the degree that they actually believed we were living in a post-racial society. Why? Because we spent the latter part of the 20th century burying any discussion of a racial divide and refusing to admit that antagonism was still festering beneath the surface in our society. We viliﬁed people who suggested race could be a cause of conﬂict, believing our denial would somehow make the problem go away.

Clearly, insisting that race does not matter is no longer possible at the current conjuncture, as the white nationalists’ protest in Charlottesville in August 2017 so painfully demonstrated. But the return to race, this moment of the post postracial opens up opportunities as well. By moving race and white supremacy to the center of US history, this museum has the potential to reshape popular understandings of what Bunch calls “the American story.” This challenge is being levied in the arena of culture, by an intervention into the distribution of the sensible that makes ongoing white violence against blacks seeable and sayable. It creates the occasion for politics. It is in this way that the post postracial might be a step in the right direction.

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**References**


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