

Digitising History: Five Hundred Years Towards Understanding

[Freedom and Slavery: 1400–1877, The National Museum of African History and Culture, Smithsonian Museum, Online Exhibition]

Tatiana Köhler

The National Museum of African American History and Culture, an institution within the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C., has released a digitisation of their exhibition *Freedom and Slavery: 1400 – 1877*. The project is ambitious and powerful, beginning with attempts to address five centuries of history. It starts with a set of images that mark significant historical events such as the changing trade relationships between Europeans and West Africans, the Middle Passage, the effects of Industrialisation as well as the cotton plantation on the U.S. economy and the position of African Americans in the Civil War, among others, which have marked the protracted struggle for freedom from African Americans in the United States.

Beginning with a message that underpins the museum itself, we hear Maya Angelou’s voice stating that ‘*history, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.*’ The exhibition divides its substantial timeline into four individual parts: ‘Slavery and the Making of the Atlantic World’, ‘Colonial North America and the Paradox of Liberty’, ‘Slavery and the Making of a New Nation’, and ‘Coming of War, Coming of Freedom’. Each part contains several sections that deal with a composite of historical sources such as illustrations, maps, photographs, quotes and sometimes videos accompanied by a concise explanation of the object at hand.

We start the journey with ‘Slavery and the Making of the Atlantic World’. We are introduced to various European communities –such as the Spanish and Portuguese who, alongside some African leaders, benefited from the slave trade. The identity of these communities was understood differently than they are today, as indicated in this section by the nature of the trade between the various African communities and the European ones. As time progressed, the relationships between these trade partners focused less on raw materials and more on the enslavement of African people, creating the largest forced migration in history that was justified by the origin of chattel slavery, whereby humans are perceived as private property, largely informed by racist ideas.

To paint a more personal picture, we are provided with surviving documents, illustrations, objects and autobiographies that survived. One of the interesting

comparisons is the pairing of illustrations of the African lands and its people made by European travellers, alongside the sculptures from the West African region, already showcasing a different way of conceptualising the world through art. There are also numerous objects made of gold, which were used by the different African communities to trade. Among these objects, we are given a short description of Emperor Mansa Musa (1280 –1337), described as one of the wealthiest men who ever lived and in possession of a ‘seemingly endless’ source of gold. In contrast, we are also presented with the autobiography of Mahommah Baquaqua, born in 1824 in Benin, enslaved in the Caribbean and eventually reaching freedom in Canada – his story illustrates the experiences of millions of West Africans who were kidnapped, compelled to convert to Christianity, forced into slavery to work in the Americas and later escaped to the north where emancipation was a possibility.

The next part of the exhibition is entitled 'Colonial North America and the Paradox of Liberty', where we focus on the community built in the United States of America by groups of Europeans and Indigenous people, as well as enslaved and free Africans. The co-habitation of these groups of people gave way to the creation of sub-cultures in different geographical locations of the country, such as the West Coast and the southern states, despite the enslavers' drive to stamp out cultural practices be it by language or religion. Even so, this section centres on the experiences of African Americans as the people who physically transformed the land creating the plantations that would enrich a powerful elite.

There is a notable selection of maps which illustrate the growth of American colonies, as well as the expansion of land south and west, which begins with the tobacco plantations in the Chesapeake region

(today Virginia and Maryland). There is also a selection of watercolours and illustrations which show everyday life on the plantations such as people cutting the plants with a sickle or partaking in grooming practices before going to church on Sunday. We can also appreciate copies of the drafts of what would later become the Declaration of Independence, and the farm book of Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers, who kept track of the enslaved people working on his plantation. Today, we know that Jefferson kept a longstanding relationship with one of the enslaved women on his plantation, Sally Hemmings, who he owned as property as well as their children.

The third section, 'Slavery and the Making of a New Nation', explores how the history of enslaved African peoples and the ideas of race directly influenced and shaped the genesis of the United States as a newly formed and expanding nation-state. The enslaved people who had for

generations been systematically denied their freedom saw the rise in even crueller forms of slavery after the American Revolution, such as the domestic slave trade between 1820 and 1860 where enslaved people were auctioned to continue the plantation labour in the deep south and the west. It was precisely the labour of enslaved people that turned the country into the economic world leader by being the centre of cotton production in the world, despite the movements towards the abolition of the slave trade.

Given that this section looks at a more recent part of the timeline, we can appreciate illustrations and prints that were circulated among people with purchasing power, as well as some photographs. One picture shows us what the cotton gin looked like, a machine that revolutionised cotton production by compressing the picked cotton into bales. There is also a selection of maps that show the large geographical area that we know to be the

United States today and how these vast regions that were westward of the original colonies came to be incorporated into the nation. As more cruel dehumanising ways of control were instilled, so did the thinkers of abolition become more radical. One example of this is a copy of David Walker's 1829 appeal to enslaved people in which he boldly argues for enslaved people to rise against their enslavers. As a consequence, and, out of fear, white Americans banned the knowledge of reading and writing from enslaved Black Americans.

Lastly, 'Coming of War, Coming of Freedom' underlines how the struggle for freedom of Black people continued after the establishment of the nation, ultimately leading to the American Civil War. Even if black people had physically and figuratively built the foundation of the nation, these same institutions that they built—the White House, the U. S. Capitol, universities, churches, etc— continued to

oppress them and deny them their freedom. Still, the desire to reach a position of liberation and equality continued and enslaved people revolted, escaped and organised, even with other white people, in order to achieve their freedom.

This section offers a specific timeline that focuses solely on the lives of African Americans during the Civil War from 1861–1865. There is a plethora of photographs of African Americans as a group or with groups of white people posing for the camera or standing in fields. There is also a striking illustration of African Americans gathered together in a dark room, with only one man at the centre holding up a torch, as they read the Emancipation Proclamation.

The digitisation of this exhibition is a thought-provoking attempt at creating a platform that continues to share this painful history that affects the lives of

Americans to this day. As we go through the many artefacts that attest to the physical presence of a large number of the population who have recurrently been denied a place in the wider narrative of the nation, the exhibition gives the viewer a sobering look at the crude ways in which humans have acted towards each other.

The substantial timeline and number of objects give the viewer a fuller picture of this period in history. However, the exhibit could benefit from a deeper dive into the objects presented to their digital audience, given that not all objects were presented as a 3D scan and the manuscripts were only presented by the cover or the first page.

In addition to this, it was interesting to see how they had been able to digitize some of the artefacts, for example, a vase that was marked and used by an enslaved African – presented as a 3D scan, allowing for some exploration of all parts of it – and whose existence affirms the continuation of African culture even in their forced

diaspora. The digital access of these artefacts gives the viewer less geographic or financial constrictions when considering questions of slavery in the American context. Still, it remains a different experience from seeing these physical objects in real life that are permeated with a painful history given that a space dedicated solely to it would create a specific atmosphere that cannot be transmitted on screen and that would invite the viewer of a full tour of the exhibit once there.

Engaging with this part of history feels particularly important today, not just because much of our modern lives were built by people who were denied their rights to freedom. The exhibit gives us an informative outlook on the constant struggle towards freedom, and how even if there were instances when rebellions were shut down and escapees were killed, the

fight to reach equality continued and continues. In light of the Black Lives Matter movement, which has been prominent in the public eye for the past few years, this exhibition presents itself as an insightful resource to explore when thinking about the histories that make up our communities, and what we inherit and choose to pass down. Although these are uncomfortable parts of history, the exhibition encourages us accept that reality is an all-inclusive experience where pain, joy, courage and fear can cohabitate. These continuous attempts to discuss a painful past can aid a community to live with narratives that complicate the underlying notions of what is 'true' or what is 'right' by addressing the paradoxes that lie at the centre of liberation movements.