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On the cover: Portrait of Edward A. Reese taken at Kinney Pier Studio, Venice, California, 1917. From the exhibition *Black California Dreamin': African American at America's Leisure Frontier*, at the California African American Museum, Los Angeles, reviewed in this issue. (Photo courtesy Sonya Reese Greenland, used with permission from California African American Museum)

THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN

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VOLUME 45 NOVEMBER 2023 NUMBER 4

Editor's Corner: Digital Archives, School Names, and Visionary Founders 5
Sarah H. Case

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

Slow Disasters and Adaptive Archiving: COVID-19 and the Rolling-Response Model 7

Kathleen Kole de Peralta and Marissa C. Rhodes

Increasing Access to American Indian Off-Reservation Boarding School Archives: Sherman Indian Museum Digital Project 26

Eric L. Milenkiewicz

History, Historical Culture, and 1821: Creating a Digital Archive of Public History in the Twenty-First Century 47

Athena Syriatou, Elias Stouraitis, and Kyriakos Sgouropoulos

We and Bobby Lee: Public Historians and the Fight to Remove Confederate Memorials 63

Jason Pierce and Michael Powers

Busy Being Born: A Brief History of the Museum of Pop Culture 82

Trevor F. Anthony

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Black California Dreamin': Claiming Space at America's Leisure Frontier.

California African American Museum 106

Reviewed by Benjamin Cawthra

Seven Poor Children (Syv fattige børn). Danish Welfare Museum (Danmarks Forsorgsmuseum) 111

Reviewed by James I. Deutsch

Auschwitz: Not Long Ago, Not Far Away. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library 115

Reviewed by Brian J Griffith

Vietnam. Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum 122

Reviewed by Brian Robertson

Book Reviews

Remembering Enslavement: Reassembling the Southern Plantation Museum
by Amy E. Potter, Stephen P. Hanna, Derek H. Alderman, Perry L. Carter,
Candace Forbes Bright, and David L. Butler 128

Reviewed by Jennifer W. Dickey

*Blunt Instruments: Recognizing Racist Cultural Infrastructure in Memorials,
Museums, and Patriotic Practices* by Kristin Ann Hass 129

Reviewed by Jesse Bucher

Erratum 132

Exhibition Reviews

Black California Dreamin': Claiming Space at America's Leisure Frontier, California African American Museum, Los Angeles. Alison Rose Jefferson, curator. August 4, 2023–March 31, 2024.

The recent reparations legislation and public discussion concerning the fate of Bruce's Beach in Manhattan Beach, California, makes *Black California Dreamin'*, an exhibition at the California African American Museum, relevant to the political and cultural moment. Bruce's Beach, a leisure site developed by an African American family in 1912 but confiscated by the city in 1924, was returned to the family's descendants in 2022 as part of a tentative legislative move toward restitution for racial discrimination in California. The state bought the property from the family in 2023, but the "discovery" of Bruce's Beach is part of a larger project of cultural archaeology revealing hidden histories of African American space-claiming on "America's Leisure Frontier."



Black California Dreamin' at the California African American Museum. (Photograph by Benjamin Cawthra, 2023)

Throughout the exhibition, visitors learn of Black leisure spaces that vary considerably in type—beaches, a country club, a dude ranch. The fates of these have too much in common. In story after story, place after place, white opposition to the existence of these Black spaces results in their (sometimes violent) demise or diminishment and as blows to the emerging Black middle class. But the exhibition also chronicles places such as Eureka Villa (Val Verde) in the Santa Clarita Valley, where public funds strengthened this tourist attraction and area economic engine before the end of segregation expanded Black access to leisure spaces. Most of these hidden leisure microhistories end in the years just before and after World War II, but the exhibition does not end the story at mid-century. A sense of contemporary possibility enlivens the end of the show and speaks directly to generations creating new spaces and participating in activities previous generations were, in many cases, forced to surrender.

Curator Alison Rose Jefferson, author of a book on the subject, has gathered a variety of materials from public and private archives to reveal Black leisure spaces in the early-to-mid twentieth century in Southern California, reminding us that community relationships can yield important artifacts, stories, and perspectives on public historical questions. Photographs, ephemera, and documents from area repositories are combined with family scrapbooks, rare film footage, period textiles,



Visitors in “The California Dream,” the exhibition’s main section. (Photograph by Benjamin Cawthra, 2023)

and contemporary art to tell the story of a lost past and resurgent present in Black California leisure. The exhibition's beach-ready color scheme refuses to concede to the sense of loss conveyed by the stories of Black leisure spaces whose names and locations have only recently been recovered. Rather, the exhibition's two-part structure suggests a determined contemporary continuity with that past. The two main sections, "The California Dream" and "The New California Dream," reinforce that sense of generational solidarity.



Exhibition map of Black leisure sites. (Photograph by Benjamin Cawthra, 2023)

“The California Dream” argues for a Black history of that concept, demonstrating that the myths of climate, sunshine, outdoor life, and the chance to start over at the continent’s edge was undermined for African Americans by segregation and discrimination in jobs and public accommodations. Prevented access to most leisure spaces that reinforced this mythos, Black Californians found ways to carve out their own. The section opens with a large map of lost Southern California Black leisure spaces, establishing the geographical reach of those spaces and orienting



Start of the exhibition’s “The New California Dream” section. (Photograph by Benjamin Cawthra, 2023)

visitors for the tour to come. Lake Elsinore, Huntington Beach, Santa Monica—these and other points on the map each receive their own subsection of textual narrative, historical images, and artifactual touchstones. The Black-owned Pacific Beach Club, set to open in Huntington Beach in 1926, featured Egyptian revival architecture and a lighted boardwalk, a remarkable expression of ambition that arsonists burned down just before opening. Beaches at Santa Monica presented an ongoing challenge for Black beachgoers, who claimed the beach not far from the city’s first Black church as their own. Despite ongoing struggles, a Black presence here and in neighboring Venice continued through the decades. That long history yielded troves of family photographs, seen here in well-chosen examples, augmented nearby in the gallery by swimwear textiles of the pre-war period. Bruce’s Beach receives its due as well, the text detailing the city’s draconian use of codes and ordinances to push the Bruce family out before eminent domain completed the job.

The briefer “New California Dream” section along the exhibition’s final wall is an attractive update of the show’s theme and recounts the recent Bruce’s Beach



Central gathering place around a surf video. (Photograph by Benjamin Cawthra, 2023)

news in detail. The section also reorients Black recreation to embrace water, expressed most forcefully in surfing. The exhibition views surfing history through a Black lens, chronicling black surfers and surf organizations while paying attention to gender identity as well as access. A series of contemporary artworks by David Mesfin, June Edmonds, Chase Hall, and Derick Adams provide vibrant commentary on the exhibition theme, reinforcing the claiming of Black leisure space as a political act but also using it to create iconographies of communion.

There are other strong touches elsewhere in the gallery. The period swimwear display on mannikins is simple but effective. The exhibition's orientation is logical and punctuated with space, with areas lacking cases used effectively for the map and for projecting extensive and fascinating footage from a Golden State Mutual Life Insurance company leisure gathering at Val Verde in 1947, including picnicking and a beauty pageant. A small display on the importance of family scrapbooks is well considered and appealing, an effort to help younger generations link the way they make and store images with those of their ancestors.

In a gallery that is of moderate size, the designers have avoided clutter, although there is generally more text in this exhibition than many visitors will have the patience or time to read fully. In the center of the gallery space is an oval screen projecting video of the ocean from a surfer's point of view. While the imagery is often indistinct, the site nevertheless is an attractive gathering point for reflection and conversation, with surfboard artifacts suspended above and scrim versions of exhibition images enclosing the space.

In its triumphant recovery of a hidden Black past revealing an obscure but significant element of the Freedom Movement and optimism about a more inclusive present and future, *Black California Dreamin'* revels in the power of imaginative yet restrained exhibitry to tell an important and moving story.

Benjamin Cawthra, California State University, Fullerton

Seven Poor Children (Syv fattige børn). Danish Welfare Museum (Danmarks Forsorgsmuseum), Svendborg, Denmark. Jeppe Wichmann Rasmussen, Curator, Researcher and Project Leader; Martin Friis Hansen, Researcher; Torden & Lynild (Thunder & Lightning), exhibition designers. September 19, 2020–ongoing. <https://www.svendborgmuseum.dk/udstillinger/syv-fattige-born> (Danish only).

The extraordinary exhibition, *Seven Poor Children* (or *Syv fattige børn* in Danish), began with one extraordinary photograph from the early 1950s. It shows Lisa, then a five-or-six-year-old girl, smiling as she tenderly holds the hand of a man in his late eighties, seated on a bench outside the workhouse (formerly known as the poor-house) in Svendborg, Denmark. Some four years before *Seven Poor Children*