

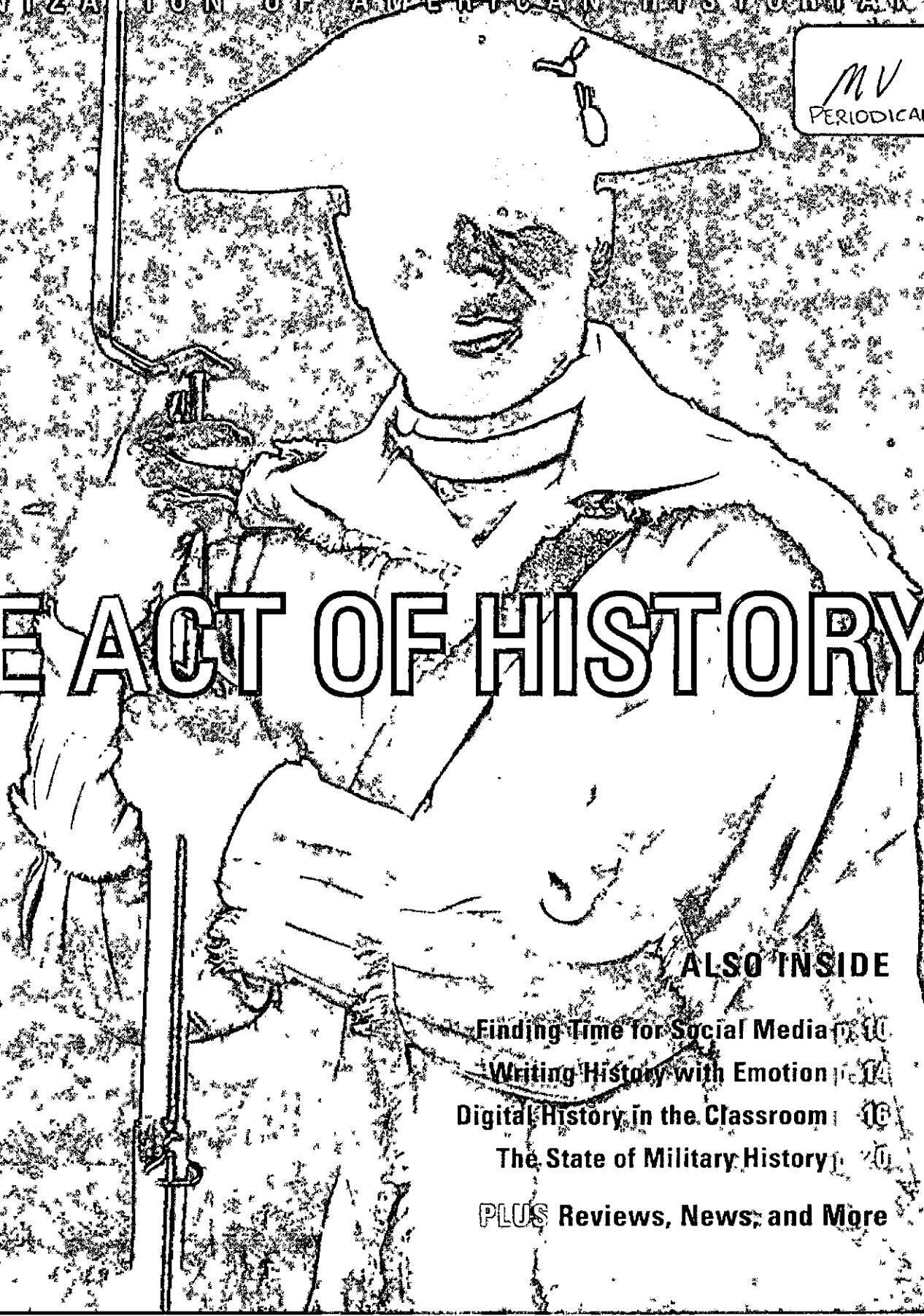
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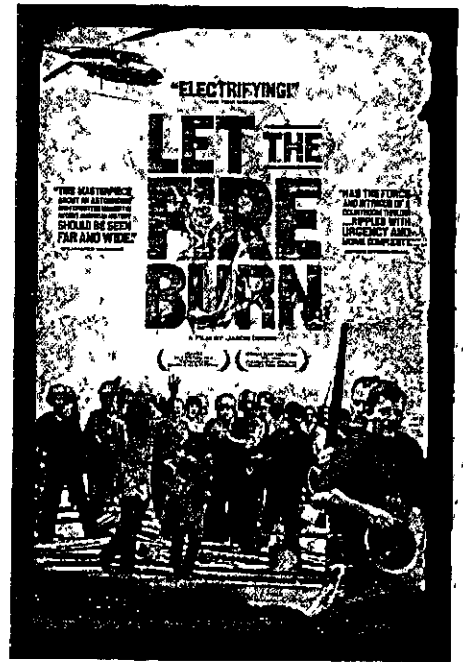
What Remains after the Fire

by Juan M. Floyd-Thomas

On May 13, 1985, the MOVE organization, a small group of African American religious dissidents, resisted an eviction order by Philadelphia police to vacate their headquarters in Cobbs Creek, an African American middle-class neighborhood in west Philadelphia. As the crisis escalated, police used tear gas, water cannons, and approximately ten thousand rounds of ammunition to drive the group from its row house. Per direct orders from Mayor Wilson Goode, the city's first African American mayor, a makeshift bomb was dropped from a helicopter onto the house's rooftop bunker. The subsequent blast ignited a massive blaze that not only consumed

the house but also engulfed much of the neighborhood in flames. The death and suffering that resulted from this episode was even worse. Eleven MOVE members, six adults and five children, were burned alive and nearly 250 residents were left homeless. Only two MOVE members emerged from the flames that day: an adult woman and an adolescent boy. Jason Osder's directorial debut, *Let the Fire Burn* (2013), is a thoughtful and provocative meditation on this important yet overlooked episode in modern U.S. history.

Let the Fire Burn depicts the tragic event as the culmination of a longtime feud between MOVE and the city



LET THE FIRE BURN

Zeitgeist Films

2013



MOVE member Delbert Africa is arrested by Philadelphia police in 1978.

Photo courtesy of Zeitgeist Films

of Philadelphia. The film's title is a direct quote from Mayor Goode, who summarily explained his administration's decision to "let the fire burn" in the hopes of ending the stalemate once and for all. Remarkably, the film is a found-footage pastiche consisting entirely of obscure archival news segments, student documentary film, and never-before-seen video recordings of a special investigative commission convened to determine the origins of the crisis. The rough-hewn quality of the source materials provides the viewer an immersive and immediate experience of the events as they unfold. Osder's strategic use of flashbacks and flash-forwards provides a concise, compelling narrative structure that gives the documentary the magnetic allure of a suspenseful thriller. For instance, Osder juxtaposes the Philadelphia police department's dispassionate report of Delbert Africa's capture and arrest before the investigative commission with newly unearthed video of the MOVE member being savagely beaten by police. In this scene and others, Osder's film reveals the significance of the camera's eye as an important bulwark against government conspiracy and cover-ups.

Osder also succeeds in showing how the city's government repeatedly made bad decisions on behalf of its citizens that culminated in the death of almost a dozen people and the destruction of an entire neighborhood. Yet it must be noted that the film does not thoroughly explore the complex identity politics and religious dimensions pivotal to MOVE's history. For anyone interested in such issues, filmmaker Louis Massiah's documentary *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* (1986) offers greater insights. Likewise, *Let the Fire Burn* does not situate the conflict within the sweeping political, cultural, and social transformations of late twentieth-century America.

Using the videotaped deposition of young Michael Moses Ward (Birdie Africa)—the only child survivor—as a framing device, *Let the Fire Burn* clearly situates Ward as the heart and soul of this film. Osder utilizes Ward's eyewitness testimony to reveal the callous governmental decision-making process that led to the catastrophic bombing. In light of Ward's untimely death in September 2013, the scenes featuring the traumatized youngster take on a heart-wrenching poignancy. Watching a thirteen-year-old Ward being questioned by lawyers, we see a sad child haunted by torturous memories and nightmares of the day that his whole world became an inferno. Similarly, as a mesmerizing

examination of a crucial moment in recent history, *Let the Fire Burn* preserves the memories of people whose lives were utterly devastated by the cataclysmic fire yet must never be forgotten. ■■■

Juan M. Floyd-Thomas is a professor of African American religious history at Vanderbilt University. He is the author of Liberating Black Church History (2014) and The Origins of Black Humanism: Reverend Ethelred Brown and the Unitarian Church (2008).

P R I N T

WHO OWNS AMERICA'S PAST: THE SMITHSONIAN AND THE PROBLEM OF HISTORY

Robert C. Post ▫ Johns Hopkins University Press ▫ 2013

Reviewed by Stephen Lubar



The Smithsonian finally gets its Washington insider-tells-all memoir, complete with memorandums in the author's files but not the official archives, off-the record conversations remembered thirty years later, and, of course, some snarky (but discreet) score settling. Current and former Smithsonian employees will immediately check the index. (Disclosure: I'm one of those former employees, and a former colleague of the author, and I'm in the index.)

But the book's not really an exposé. It's more a history, and a narrowly focused one. The title is misleading. Post is interested in the history of technology, and so he focuses on activities in the curatorial offices of the fifth floor of the National Museum of American History, and, to a lesser extent, the National Air and Space Museum. He considers only exhibits, not collections or public programs. And it's not really about "the problem of history" in a general way. Post is interested in museum management, historical exhibitions, and the relation of museum work and academic work.

Post, retired curator at the American History museum (and former editor of *Technology and Culture*), has a good memory, good archival instincts, and an engaging writing style. He's written an insider's history that lets an outsider

listen in on staff meetings, read memos, and get a sense of the ways that the Smithsonian made decisions. He was part of that world, knows the people he writes about, and does a good job of explaining how things worked, especially in the years when he was actively engaged at the museum. But he doesn't bring much perspective or much interest in the bigger issues of museum work more generally. There's some discussion of ownership of the past, and the "problem" of public historical work, but almost no mention of other museums, or connection to the extensive museum studies literature. Still, there is some valuable history and analysis here, and a rare inside view that will be instructive for history museum studies students and curators.

Post argues that there have been three styles of history exhibitions at the Smithsonian: collections-driven, neo-traditional displays of objects; story-driven narratives; and postmodern, immersive exhibitions. He documents that all three types have coexisted for almost a century, and credits designers, even more than curators, for the exhibitions that worked well.

The relationship of academic work to museum work is a recurring theme. Post notes the Smithsonian's desperate eagerness to be like a university, to hire Ivy League Ph.D.s and faculty consultants,

and to push curators to write academic books. This rarely ended well. Related to this is another theme: curators' resistance to change, or, for that matter, to work on anything other than their own pet projects. Museum administrators can find many how-not-to's here.

Post covers recent Smithsonian controversies—the *Enola Gay* exhibit fiasco, increasing reliance on private donors, Secretary Larry Small's expense accounts—and while he does not add much information, he does provide a useful historical perspective. Post notes the rise of the "stakeholder" in museum discussions, and muses about the difference between, say, the demands of the Air Force Association to control the story of the *Enola Gay* and the concerns of Native American groups about their representation in Smithsonian museums. He doesn't have much patience for newfangled ideas about community involvement or shared authority.

Post is too good a historian to write the easy story of decline from the good old days that he occasionally veers toward. Indeed, this book documents a remarkable consistency. The Smithsonian has always negotiated with the rich and powerful who wanted their stories told. Exhibitions were always a combination of "authentic" collections and "postmodern" construction. Museum directors have