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Never Talk About Slavery at Christmas Time: Banned at the Library of Congress.

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In 1995 I was asked by the Library of Congress to develop an exhibition of photographs, maps, drawings and other images based on my then recently published book Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery (1993). Given that the book drew heavily upon the collections of the Library, it seemed to everyone involved like a sensible endeavor. The exhibition began to tour in February 1995 and had already been shown at four sites (all of them in southern states) when it was installed for an unannounced showing at the LOC. On the morning of December 18 the show was set up in the lobby of the sixth floor of the Madison Building. By noon that day, all the images had been taken down and returned to their three massive packing crates. Forty phone calls by black employees to Librarian James Billington's office protested the images of former slaves and remnants of their quarters, fields, and work spaces. The complainants said the pictures were offensive and that they didn't want see such images particularly where they had to work. Granted that any public conversation

about slavery-- even via the exhibit mode – would be a difficult task, it was even more so given the nature of the holiday season and the absence of any audience forewarning or preparation. Several years later, when memories of these grievances had receded into the background, an African-American journalist advised me that one should “never talk about slavery at Christmas Time.” The psychological freight that accompanies the public’s understanding of slavery frames, she suggested, gives rise to a ready resistance to the topic that is only heightened in a period devoted to joyous celebration.

While the Library of Congress’s showing of “Back of Big House” was a total disaster, within three weeks the very same exhibit was reinstalled at the main branch of the DC public library and proved to be one of their best attended exhibitions. The contrast is revealing about how one might encourage the public to engage difficult topics like our history of chattel slavery and its concomitant abuse of African-Americans over the course of three and half centuries. I have published two lengthy essays on my experiences as the author of this exhibition: “Looking Behind the Marble Mask: Varied African American Responses to Difficult History in Washington, DC” in Composing Urban History and the Constitution of Civic Identities (Czaplicka and Ruble, eds.) and “The Last Great Taboo Subject: Exhibiting Slavery at the Library of Congress” in Slavery and Public History (Horton and Horton, eds.). I propose to show some of the images from the exhibition that are posted on my website “Back of the Big House: The Cultural Landscape of the Plantation.” I will also share some of the comments made by audiences both at the LOC and DC public library.