

LIBERTY GALA STIRS MIXED EMOTIONS FOR BLACKS

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Body

For at least some American **blacks**, the Fourth of July Statue of **Liberty** centennial celebration evokes **mixed** feelings and **emotions** well short of enthusiasm.

Some say a celebration that focuses attention on the nation's immigrant heritage serves as a disquieting reminder of the way in which **blacks** arrived in America and how they have fared since. Others say they accept the celebration of the statue's symbolism for immigrants as long as **black** immigrants from the Caribbean are recognized. Still others view it as someone else's celebration.

The ambivalence was also suggested in the approach of the Schomburg Center for Research in **Black** Culture in Harlem toward planning and naming its exhibit marking the centennial.

The result was an exhibit titled "Give me your poor . . .?: Voluntary Immigration of **Blacks** to the U.S."

Roy Bryce-Laporte, curator of the exhibit, said "caution" was necessary because the statue's symbolism of **liberty** and opportunity was not universally viewed as a reality for all **blacks**. He said the title of the exhibit also had to distinguish between those **blacks** who were in America as a result of choices made by their ancestors and those whose ancestors had no choice. He said the question mark in the title was necessary because there had been few studies of **black** immigrants and therefore many questions remained unanswered.

Reflecting the views of some **blacks** toward the festivities, John Hope Franklin, a historian of the slavery era who is a professor at Duke University, said: "It's a celebration for immigrants and that has nothing to do with me. I'm interested in it as an event, but I don't feel involved in it."

Eleanor Holmes Norton, a professor at Georgetown University's Law School and a former chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, had a different view.

"The **liberty** notion is **stirring** to anyone, and to attach negativism to the renovation of a statue proclaiming **liberty** is not my interest," she said. "American symbols should not be taken to be the property of a particular group in our heterogeneous society, and the ironies of the symbol have to be embraced."

William H. Harris, a historian and adviser to the National Parks Service who is president of Paine College in Augusta, Ga., said he believed the celebration would reflect only the European immigrant experience.

"If you can't communicate to **blacks** that when you are talking about **liberty** you are talking about more than just European immigrants but about the entire peopling of America, then there just isn't much in it for me," he said.

Roger L. Green, a Brooklyn Assemblyman who is chairman of the state's **Black** and Puerto Rican Legislative Caucus, said, "I'm ambivalent and most **blacks** I've talked to are ambivalent about the whole thing."

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A More Critical View

Mr. Green is part of a coalition of groups, the Campaign for Economic and Social Justice, which will offer a more critical view of the celebration. The group plans to stage a program and demonstrations June 28 on the campus of the City College of New York as "sober reminders" to liberty weekend celebrants, he said.

They plan to highlight how blacks arrived and how they fared once they got to America, he said, and to contrast the concept of liberty with current problems of the homeless, black veterans and black children living in poverty.

"The concept of liberty has universal appeal," Mr. Green said, "but everyone appears to be noticing only the statue's torch and not looking at the manacles on her ankles." The statue by Frederic Auguste Bartholdi has broken chains at her feet. Most interpret the broken chains as symbolizing an escape from oppression.

David Wolper, who is planning the three days of events, said blacks would be well represented among the thousands of musicians, athletes, dancers, other performers and the production staff involved in the festivities. He said the celebration was not only about the nation's immigrant heritage, in which blacks from the Caribbean share in a small way, but also about the concept of liberty. But he said there would be no attempt to depict routes by which other ethnic groups came to the country nor how they fared.

"My assignment was to produce a celebration and not a review of all that went on in the nation's history," he said. Just as the events do not touch on the subject of black slaves, he said, they do not touch on the often dreary physical conditions, sweatshops and hostile attitudes that many European immigrants faced once they sailed past the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island.

'Talking About the Positive'

"You can see the negative in anything, but we're talking about the positive," he said.

Mr. Wolper and others involved in the planning pointed out that among the 12 immigrants who are to receive the first Medals of Liberty from President Reagan in the celebration is Dr. Kenneth B. Clark, the black New York psychologist. Dr. Clark, a native of Panama, came to the United States when he was 5 years old.

His research on the effects of racial discrimination on the education of black children figured prominently in the arguments that led to the landmark Supreme Court decision outlawing segregated schools.

"Blacks, too, were immigrants to this country and the events and the award show that," said Mr. Wolper. Noting that Italian and Irish groups had been angered that they were not represented among the 12 recipients, he said that members of the selection committee were not instructed as to which immigrant groups should be among the winners.

"Some people on the committee might have thought deliberately in their own mind to pick a black immigrant, but it was not the subject of a particular discussion," he said.

Mr. Bryce-Laport, the curator of the Schomburg exhibit, said it was difficult to determine how many black immigrants there were since many arrived from Canada or colonies of England or France and are listed on records by those countries of origin and not race. His best estimate was that from 1820 to 1980, more than two million blacks had voluntarily immigrated.

The Schomburg exhibit, which begins June 15 and runs to Sept. 7, will use some original documents, photographs, diaries and other memorabilia to sketch the experiences of black immigrants dating back to 1820, Mr. Bryce-Laporte said.

'I'm Going to Celebrate'

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The inclusion of Dr. Clark was for some an important step in representing some facet of the **black** experience in the United States. Earl Graves, the publisher of **Black** Enterprise Magazine and a member of the Ellis Island Centennial Commission, said: "I think it was important that a **black** person be recognized in all of this. I still see enormous inequities in this country, but I'm going to celebrate like anyone else."

Mr. Clark declined to comment on his selection.

"If I were Ken Clark, I'd feel a little uneasy," said the Rev. Jesse Jackson, who added that he viewed the celebration as being focused on the immigrant tradition to the exclusion of the slave tradition. He said this was a distortion of the nation's history. "This would be an excellent time to redeem and amend the Statue of **Liberty** just as we redeemed and amended our Constitution to outlaw slavery," Mr. Jackson said.

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