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Interpreting Difficult Knowledge[1]

By Julia Rose, Ph.D.

Increasingly, public historians are talking about finding ways to interpret histories of oppression, tragedy, and violence that encourage visitors and other audiences to reflect on the roots of society today. Interpretations of traumatic histories ask audiences to acknowledge the human toll and the varied viewpoints enveloped in histories of oppression. Such social justice education demands both emotional and intellectual engagement from audiences; engagement not easily carried out. Museum workers and public historians explain that their audiences often express resistance to hearing about oppression. Why? What makes oppressive history difficult to interpret? Why do museums refer to histories of oppression and violence as "the hard stuff"? What is at stake?

Allendale Plantation cabins on display at the West Baton Rouge Museum in Port Allen, Louisiana, document life on a sugar plantation where enslaved laborers and then wage paid laborers cultivated sugar cane. Visitors are engaged in conversations throughout their guided tour allowing visitors to ask questions and discuss slave life and the radical transitions African Americans navigated during the Reconstruction era and the Civil Rights era on south Louisiana sugar plantations.

In the middle of the twentieth century, the rise of social history asked us to recognize the contributions and events of the common person. This paved the way for museum workers and other public historians to grapple with long-held biases against researching and interpreting the histories of oppression against minorities, women, and "other" populations, and the pain these groups endured. The long-held tradition of focusing on white, male, majority populations has given way to a genuinely widespread movement to elevate, interpret, and study histories of common persons. The results include contextualized and integrated social histories that recall a complex maze of relationships among historical players, their historical times, and relevant material culture. These histories tend to reveal stories of pride and shame and stories about achievements and afflictions.

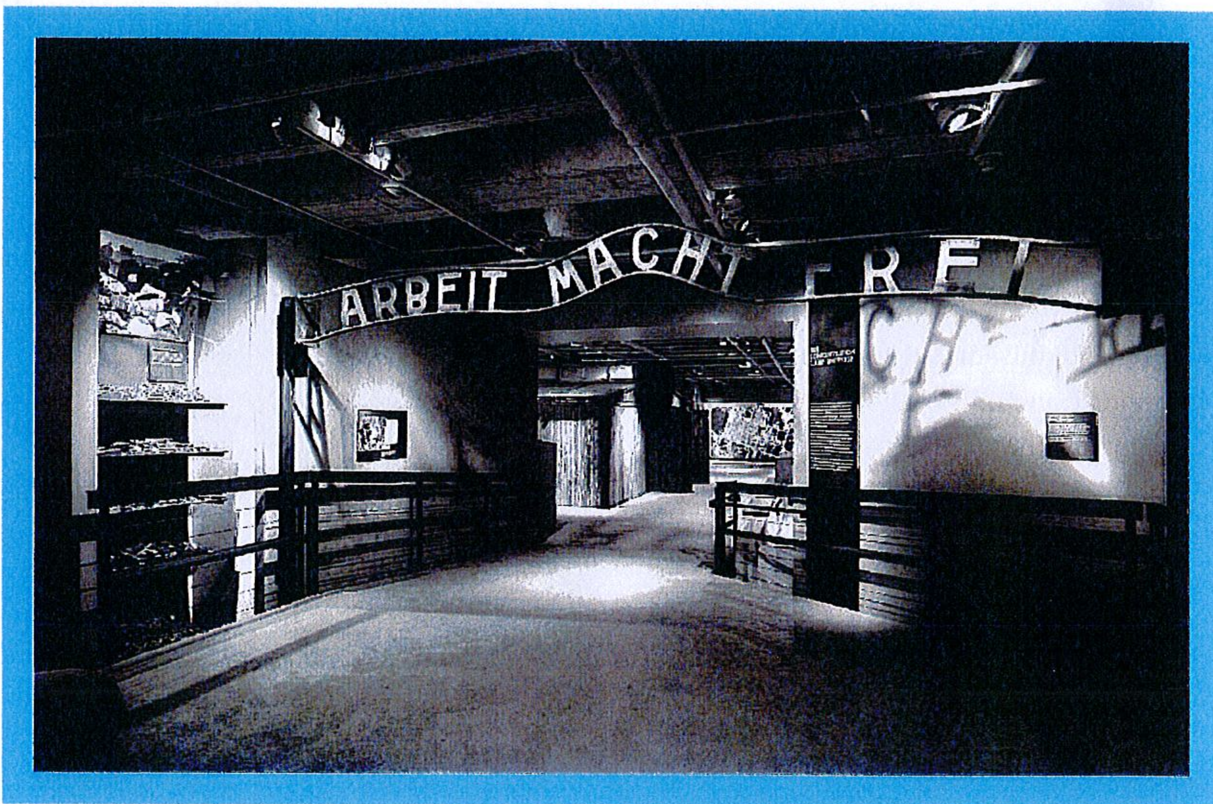
Interestingly, social history scholarship not only asks us to find out what happened to marginalized or silenced populations, but also asks us to take on the immense challenge of engaging audiences in interpretations about traumatic histories. Audiences, including museum visitors, attendees to films and lectures, museum workers, and public historians are faced with learning about historical traumas. These audiences are learners and they deserve effective strategies to engage in the learning of histories of oppression.

Defining Difficult Knowledge

The hard stuff in museums and other public history venues includes interpretive content about histories of mass violence, racism, enslavement, genocide, war, HIV/Aids, slavery, and other traumatic events. Educational psychologist Deborah Britzman calls the hard stuff "Difficult Knowledge." Audiences, visitors, public history workers, and learners in general who wish to avoid, forget, or ignore traumatic histories will turn away from the difficult knowledge that they cannot stand to know or bear to hear. The person faced with learning difficult knowledge that she or he cannot bear to know represses that information and returns to it through expressions of resistance that appear as negativism, irreverence, jokes, and denials.[2]

Traumatic histories can instigate negative responses from all types of learners making some public history presentations and museum experiences uncomfortable, confrontational, or even appear illegitimate. Responses are unique to each person. Everyone does not have the same level of tolerance for learning histories of oppression, which makes the job of developing equitable and sensitive interpretation strategies for history about difficult knowledge extremely challenging.[3]

Much is at stake. Interpreting difficult knowledge questions how people understand history and how they have long viewed the world. Exhibits, collec-



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Visitors to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum pass under this gate, a cast taken from the original entrance to the Auschwitz death camp, inscribed with the ironic phrase Arbeit Macht Frei (Work Makes One Free).

tions, and historic sites about difficult knowledge can be disruptive and can interfere with a visitor's individual reality. The history of hate or violence can be felt as a confrontation to an individual's sense of morality and pains the individual to accept the history of such horror. The immediate expressions of resistance are signals that an internal learning crisis has formed for that individual. The new difficult knowledge is in conflict with how the learner understands the history. Britzman explains the learner cannot transcend the internal conflict caused by the difficult knowledge. Instead he or she must work through the internal conflict in an emotional and cognitive process to make sense of the new difficult knowledge. The learner may exclaim, for example, "That is unbelievable!" or "That is not what I read!"[4]

Julia Rose

The Sick House at Welham Plantation during the antebellum period served as a hospital for sick and infirm slaves. The Sick House is on exhibit at the LSU Rural Life Museum.

Consider for a moment the internal risk of learning difficult knowledge. Think about the possibility of how this can put the learner at risk by disturbing his or her innermost understanding of himself or herself. Does the history of the Jim Crow South, for example, raise personal questions about how the learner understands race relations and how he or she sees race relations today impacting his or her life? Does the history of preserving the gates at Auschwitz in Poland raise emotional feelings in the learner that makes him or her want to change the subject and not talk about the Holocaust? Does the learner feel implicated, self conscious, or threatened? Do some of our responses to the difficult knowledge lead us to resist a particular interpretation because it is too much to bear? At stake is "my understanding of what I believe to be true." Difficult knowledge can lead to learners resisting information in an exhibit so vehemently that he or she will just shut down and refuse further engagement with the subject, the exhibit, or the presenting institution.

> A social scientist cannot change the data, only record and analyze it. The first few "dirty words" [referring to racial slurs used in interpreting American slavery at a living history site] elicited some nervous laughter in a room of 600 people, but we all got over it. But our issue is can our audience get over it? How can we show them hard issues honestly? Can living history do this, or are we only good for the cheery stuff?
>
> —Association of Living History, Farms, and Agricultural Museums Member[5]

A common discussion among exhibit planners and museum workers is a plea for the interpretation to provide "just the facts" and an interpretation of history that is neutral and not controversial. In reality, a historical interpretation will always come from some particular viewpoint and facts are always delineated by a history's authors. The task for museum workers and public historians, then, is to take into account the learning crisis difficult knowledge will invariably incite in some audiences. At stake is the individual learner's comfort and at risk is the individual experiencing a stressful learning crisis that is too much to bear.

How then do museum workers and other public historians approach interpreting difficult knowledge given these insights into the emotive and cognitive powers of difficult knowledge to impede learning and jeopardize an individual's sense of self?

Julia Rose

Slave cabin on exhibit at Audubon State Historic Park at Oakley Plantation in St. Francisville, Louisiana. Shoes resting against the hearth help illustrate the presence of an enslaved man who lived in this antebellum cotton plantation dwelling.

The 5Rs of Commemorative Museum Pedagogy Reception

One strategy for enabling learners in history institutions to engage with difficult knowledge is called "Commemorative Museum Pedagogy" (CMP). CMP provides ample time for the learning process to unfold to allow the learner to work through his or her learning crisis. CMP is made up of five stages designed to provide a sensitive learning setting. The five stages of CMP are easily remembered as the "5Rs": *Receive*, *Resist*, *Repeat*, *Reflect*, and *Reconsider*. They are all parts of a nonlinear cognitive process for learners to make sense of a disruptive history.[6]

1. Receive

Audiences are likely willing to learn new historical information when they arrive at an exhibit or public history venue. Other than school groups on a field trip, audiences choose to come and spend time reflecting on the historical content in an exhibition or presentation. At the beginning of the experience or presentation, the unknown is how committed each individual is to learning about the history presented. Also not evident is how much each individual feels he or she already knows about the subject interpreted in this venue. Museum workers and public historians can provide welcoming introduction spaces. They can include disclosure statements about the kind of difficult knowledge contained in the exhibit or presentation, and they can inform visitors that subject matter in the exhibit or presentation could be upsetting or controversial.

2. Resistance

Audience members are also learners who will respond to difficult knowledge in unique and personal ways. When new information is perceived as disruptive to the learner's understanding of history, or challenges the learner's sense of self or moral senses, he

> Some people believe that ignoring the past or whitewashing it (literally) will allow healing to occur; that we can get on with a just world by simply looking forward from today; that there need be no account of the past, no dredging up of old skeletons, no probing of old wounds. We fundamentally challenge this assertion. We believe that without a full and open discussion of the past, its relation to contemporary inequalities and oppressions, and considerations of how to respond to these historical and contemporary inequalities, true healing cannot take place. Sites that pride themselves as providing history to the masses have an important role to play in this process—either as maintainers of oppressive patterns or as teachers for a just future.[7]

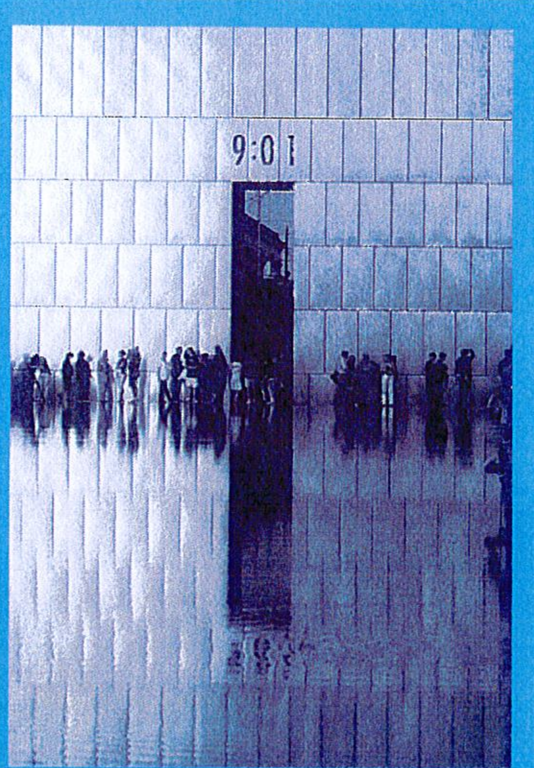
or she will react by repressing the new knowledge in a negative way. These negative responses are indicative of the individual experiencing a learning crisis. Resistance can be detected through individuals' verbal expressions saying that the difficult knowledge is unpleasant, uncomfortable, false, or not worth thinking about; resistance can also be heard in the guise of biases, jokes, or sarcasm. Physical responses are also indicators of resistance such as leaving, attending to minor distractions, or moving quickly through the exhibition. Resistance is indeed a personal response and includes the healthy intellectual responses to contemplate, challenge, and research information and interpretations. Resistance occurs in degrees of internal disruption and is not always an indication of a visitor's lack of knowledge but rather an indication that the difficult knowledge presented is impacting that visitor in a new way. Resistance to difficult knowledge is part of a normal learning process. The phenomenon of resistance includes the most learned as well as the most inexperienced visitor.

3. Repetition

Learners will begin grappling with information they find disruptive and repeat particular parts of difficult knowledge in a variety of ways. Repetition allows the learner to consider more deeply the content he or she finds hard to accept. The learner can repeat a story again and again aloud or to himself or herself, or ask the same questions, or read a text multiple times, all as parts of the learning process for working through the difficult knowledge. Learners will likely mix expressions of resistance and repetition. It is important to recognize that the 5Rs of CMP do not necessarily happen sequentially. For example, a learner can move from expressions of disbelief to explaining his or her own personal connections to the history and back to disbelief multiple times.

On one occasion, at a training session at a historical plantation site, museum workers who could not immediately accept a revised narrative that included the history of the site's enslaved community repeated out loud the new slave life information, saying it was not believable or was insignificant. Others repeated the portions of the regular tour narrative they were attached to, or portions that were in jeopardy of being edited if the new slave life histories were incorporated. These museum workers did not necessarily refuse resisted knowledge. In many instances they repeated the resisted information aloud and reread the new tour narrative and secondary history sources. They were eager for opportunities to repeat information as they reflected on the possibility of expanding the current tour to include slave life history.[8]

As learners work through repressed difficult knowledge by way of repetition, each new piece of knowledge has to be fit into his or her internal psychic reality. This rebuilding of the learner's inner world characterizes the successful work of learning difficult knowledge.[9]



Greater Oklahoma City Chamber & CVB

Volunteering at the Memorial has become one of the most meaningful experiences in my life. During my career, I worked with people from across the United States and we would often talk about where we were on 'history changing' days and how our lives were changed. Visiting with people at the Memorial, I've seen how events have affected people not only nationwide but worldwide.

—Docent Gayle Bryan (2009)

4. Reflection

Learners are entitled to sufficient time to reflect on the difficult knowledge they are grappling with on a tour or in a presentation. Opportunities to talk about their thoughts and ask questions are important for people to work through the information they find challenging. Reflection can be entwined with expressions of repetition when the learner continues to repeat information and questions. Not all reflection

What Museum Workers and Public Historians Can Do:

1. **Use CMP as a framework to more effectively engage audiences in difficult knowledge.**

The 5Rs give learners time and resources to work through difficult knowledge.

a. **Reception:** Provide a welcoming introduction that includes disclosure statements that difficult knowledge is contained in the venue that could be upsetting or controversial.

b. **Resistance:** Anticipate negative responses from learners and allow them to be aired with the understanding that expressions of resistance are likely indicative of the individual experiencing a learning crisis.

c. **Repetition:** Arrange the learning setting to include avenues to revisit artifacts and displays or to reread information. Make information available to learners to review online or in print to study at their own pace.

d. **Reflection:** Ask learners if they have questions. Provide opportunities for conversation or places to sit down to encourage learners to reflect on the difficult knowledge.

e. **Reconsideration:** Offer learners opportunities to respond by providing places for them to share their ideas or comments. Offer social action information that is relevant to the theme of the difficult knowledge. Ask learners, "What do you think?"

2. **Design interpretations that encourage empathy from visitors.** Consider including cameos of individuals or groups that recount the traumatic historical journey of one person or a group. Visitors will care about the condition of historical communities and individuals when the interpretation includes rich descriptions of real people who are recognizable as men, women, and children with familial and communal relationships to one another and to the world. Such multidimensional representations work to encourage empathy, moving learners to truly care about historical individuals; herein lay the questions about immorality and injustices that difficult knowledge raises for learners.[10]

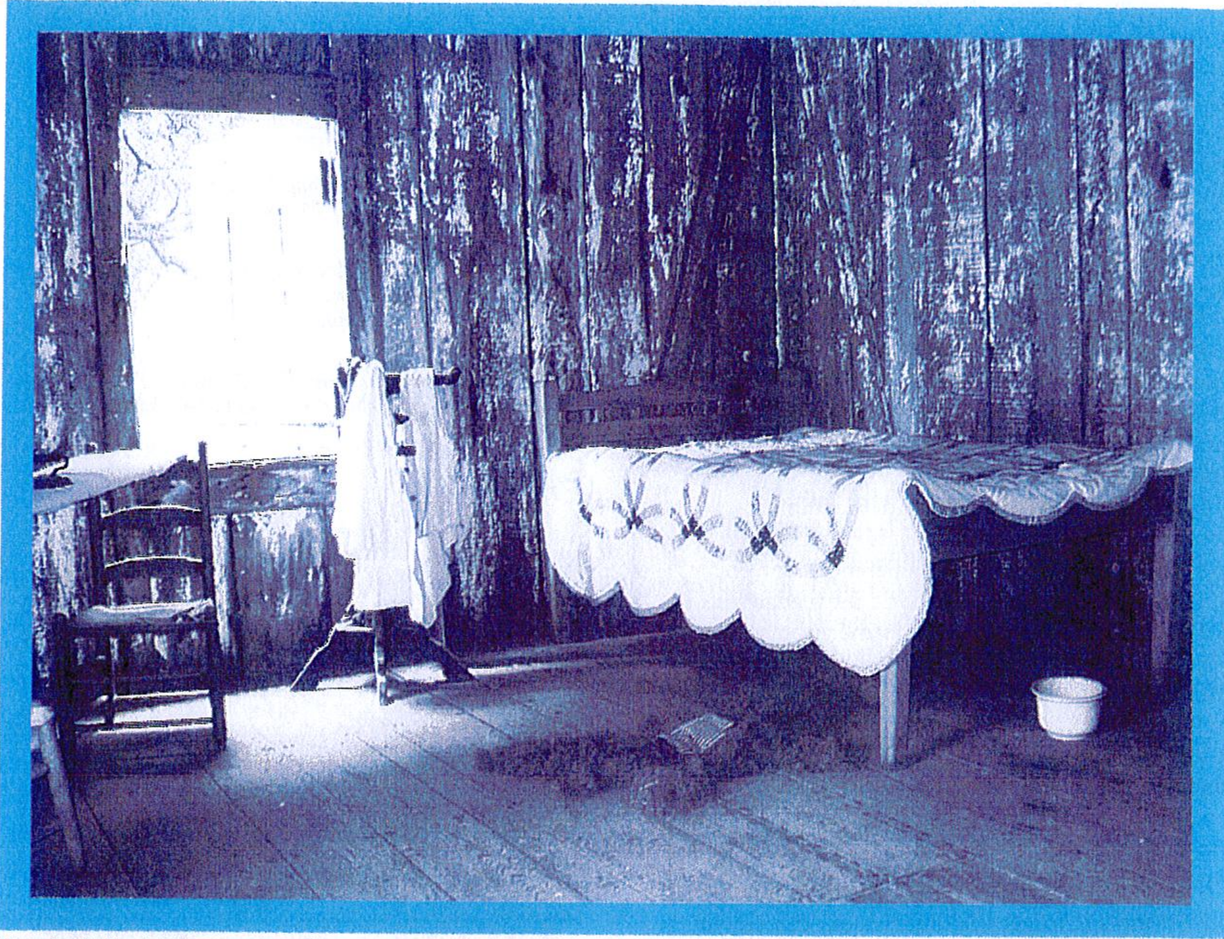
3. **Avoid objectifying human experiences.** The words we use to interpret history can unintentionally create a buffer between the learner and the human suffering entwined in history. Generic and anonymous descriptions make it less painful to talk about violence and oppression. Language can lessen learners' immediate resistances but simultaneously disengage learners from reflecting on the human consequences of the violence or oppression. Avoid words like "slave" that objectify the people we intend to interpret by leaving out their identities and human attributes.

4. **Recognize that difficult knowledge will generate varying degrees of audience engagement.**

5. **Recognize that engagement in learning difficult knowledge is succeeding when learners show evidence of the 5Rs and demand to know more.**

What Museum Workers and Public Historians Should Not Do:

- Assume your interpretation is neutral.
- Believe facts are unquestionable.
- Believe your audience sees the world the way you see the world.
- Rush your audience to understand an interpretation.
- Ask audiences to "get over it."
- Avoid histories of oppression, violence, or tragedy.



Julia Rose

Historically furnished sugar plantation cabins from Allendale Plantation provide settings for interpreting life from the slavery era through the Civil Rights Movement. Pictured is the interior of a field worker's cabin c. 1870. West Baton Rouge Museum, Port Allen, LA.

happens immediately in the museum or lecture hall. Learners in a museum, for instance, might ask for more information from a tour guide, reread exhibit labels, purchase books in the gift shop, or pursue more information about the difficult knowledge after they have left the exhibit. Providing opportunities for conversation or places to sit down in an exhibit or presentation will encourage learners to reflect on the difficult knowledge.

> "A group of high school students on a tour at Magnolia Mound Plantation in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, were led inside a slave quarter dwelling on exhibit. A fifteen-year-old African American woman refused to continue on the tour and would not enter the two-room 150-year old cabin exclaiming, 'I will not go in there, that is not me!'[11]"

5. Reconsideration

Learners will offer verbal expressions about how they reconsider difficult knowledge. For example, they might make analogies between the difficult knowledge and another point. "A-ha" moments are a part of reconsidering difficult knowledge and reconsideration is also evident when learners talk about their personal connections to the difficult knowledge. (For example, when walking along the reflecting pool at the Oklahoma City National Memorial, some visitors recount where they were that tragic day in 1995.) But not all responses are verbalized. Nonverbal evidence of reconsideration includes more subtle cues like head nodding, eye contact, note taking, lingering, and continued participation in viewing the exhibit. Reconsideration reveals an audience's further engagement in difficult knowledge.

Conclusion

Learners who are engaged in working through difficult knowledge respond, while others simply shut down and refuse further engagement or consideration of the topic. Indifference is one way to resist difficult

knowledge. *Each learner who is engaged will find opportunities to repeat and reflect on the information to make sense of the traumatic history, internally or aloud.* This is a key point. The learner actively engaged in learning demands more information and opportunities to think and respond to the difficult knowledge.

Successful social justice education aims to move learners to respond because responses signal that the learners care. Responses can vary widely among individuals. They range from visitors joining the museum, purchasing books, making contributions to a cause, contributing to a blog or writing an editorial, to less demonstrative actions such as discussing the difficult knowledge with others outside of the exhibition, or perhaps changing one's opinion.

Not all audiences will agree with the information on an intellectual level. That is reasonable for any project. However, the key difference between an intellectual challenge to difficult knowledge and resistance to learning is that the learner who is intellectually challenging content cares enough about the difficult knowledge that he or she continues reflecting on the subject, while the learner who shuts down is unwilling to grapple with the pain the difficult knowledge raises for him or her.

Last Word

If we could erase memories that haunt us, would we? Attempts to forget will diminish our capacity for empathy. A challenge for museum workers and public historians is to understand how to impart the histories of oppression and violence in meaningful and sensitive ways that do not shut down audiences' willingness to learn. Historical interpretations of difficult knowledge, framed through CMP, encourage audiences to respond to the histories of oppression and violence enough to care what happened in the past and eventually to demand to know more and respond in the present.

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Suggested Reading

Britzman, Deborah P. *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning.* Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1998.

Linenthal, Edward T. *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum.* Penguin Group, New York: 1995.

Simon, Roger, Sharon Rosenberg, and Claudia Eppert, eds. *Between Hope and Despair: Pedgagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.

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Endnotes

[1] The notion of difficult knowledge is especially useful to museum workers and history workers to identify the hard stuff in history that visitors and audiences often challenge, resist, find uncomfortable and avoid, or forsake for more palatable versions of histories. Educational psychologist Deborah Britzman (1998) explains that "difficult knowledge" is the hard stuff to learn, especially the traumatic histories of mass violence and oppression. The person who is faced with learning difficult knowledge that she or he cannot bear represses that information and returns to it through expressions of resistance that appear as negativism, irreverence, jokes, and denials. See Deboarah P. Britzman, Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning (Albany: State University of New York, Albany Press 1998).

[2] Deborah P. Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1998) New York: Penguin Group, 1995.

[3] Julia Rose, "Rethinking Representations of Slave Life at Historical Plantation Museums: Towards a Commemorative Museum Pedagogy," (dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2006).

[4] "Working through" is a part of the process of grieving first identified by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud in his description of mourning. See *Basic Freud: Psychoanalytic Thought for the 21st Century* by Michael Kahn, NY: Basic Books, 2002.

[5] ALFHAM listserv 2 February 2011.

[6] Rose dissertation.

[7] Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums.* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002) 270.

[8] Rose dissertation.

[9] For theoretical explanations on working through new knowledge in the context of loss in learning, see works about the educational theories by Melanie Klein and Anna Freud, including Deborah Britzman *After-Education: Anna Freud, Melanie Klein and Psychoanalytic Histories of Learning;* and Juliet Mitchell ed. *The Selected Melanie Klein.*

[10] Julia Rose, "Name by Name, Face by Face: Elevating Historical Representations of American Slave Life," *Exhibitionist,* 7:2 (Fall 2008): 37-43.

[11] Julia Rose, observation of her students at Magnolia Mound Plantation, Baton Rouge, LA, 2003.

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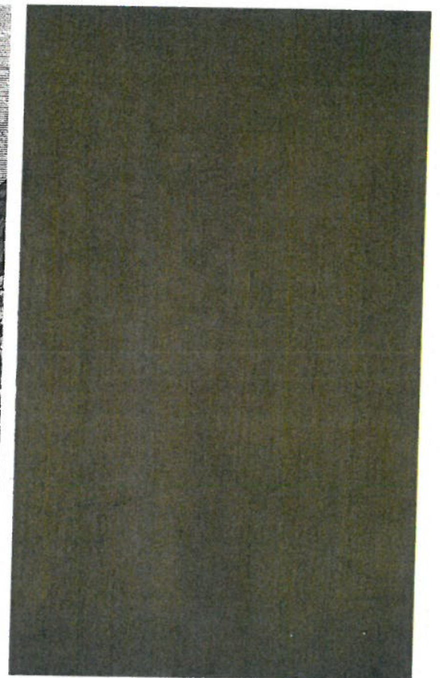
Interpreting Slavery *at Museums and Historic Sites*

Edited by Kristin L. Gallas
and James DeWolf Perry

INTERPRETING HISTORY SERIES



Comprehensive Content and Contested Historical Narratives

KRISTIN L. GALLAS AND
JAMES DEWOLF PERRY

THE UNITED STATES suffers from a form of collective amnesia about much of our history of slavery, and especially about its breadth and depth throughout our society and across the country. The historical experience of slavery in the United States goes far beyond the traditional narrative of enslaved Africans picking cotton or cutting sugarcane on large southern plantations. As a result, far more museums and historic sites have a history of slavery to interpret than is commonly acknowledged, and far more Americans are connected to this history, through family, regional, or institutional ties, than suspect that they do.

A Portrait of Slavery in the United States

Consider the following historical narratives:

- On Valentine's Day 1783, an elderly free woman named Belinda successfully petitioned the Massachusetts General Court for a pension for a half-century of enslavement on a 500-acre plantation outside of Boston, now a historic site known as Royall House and Slave Quarters.[1]
- In 1803, two enslaved children, Adjua and Polydore, were purchased by James DeWolf on the West African coast and brought back to Bristol, Rhode Island, on his ship *Lavinia*, where they served the DeWolf family for the rest of their lives.[2]
- In 1844, Robin and Polly Holmes and their children were brought from Missouri to Oregon by their owner, Nathaniel Ford, and remained enslaved on his Willamette Valley farm.[3]

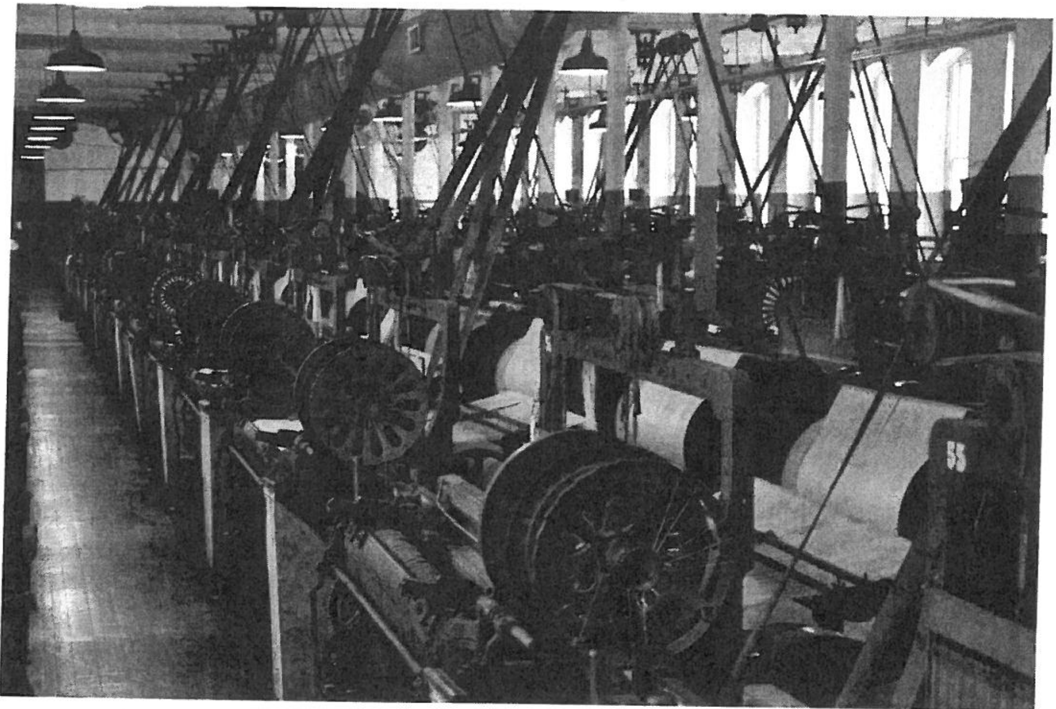
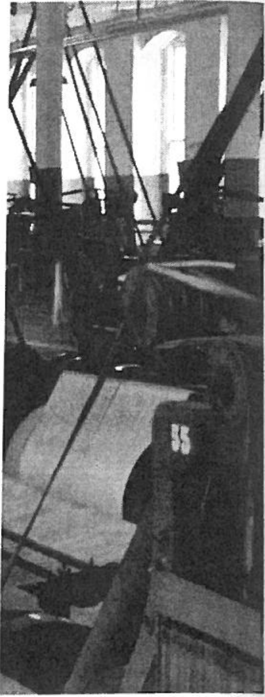


Figure 1.1. The weave room at Lowell National Historical Park's Boott Cotton Mills Museum in Lowell, Massachusetts still rings with the thumping of looms and the whirling of belts and pulleys as it maintains the tradition of producing cotton textiles.
Source: National Park Service/Jonathon Parker.

- Adelia Gates, a botanical illustrator whose collection at the Smithsonian Institution amounts to 600 works, got her start as a "Lowell girl" working in brutal conditions in one of the many cotton textile mills dotting the Northeast in the first half of the nineteenth century.[4]
- On December 15, 1860, Richard Lathers, a leading New York City merchant, organized a rally of 2,000 merchants, bankers, and shipping magnates on Wall Street to address the growing threat of Southern secession, declaring that their "sympathies have always been with Southern rights and against Northern aggression."[5]
- On May 12, 1862, Robert Smalls, the enslaved steersman of the Confederate steamer *Planter*, seized the ship and delivered it safely out of Charleston's harbor to the United States Navy, in what the *New York Herald* called "one of the most daring and heroic adventures since the war commenced."[6]

Together, these anecdotes hint at the full geographical extent and economic importance of US slavery and at the great diversity of experiences of slavery and the ways in which those who were enslaved engaged in active resistance against enslavement.

A comprehensive portrait of slavery in the United States would surely include scenes of enslaved people toiling on southern plantations. It would also include pictures of domestic servants, coachmen, and the like. But those enslaved in this country were also dockworkers



Cotton Mills Museum in
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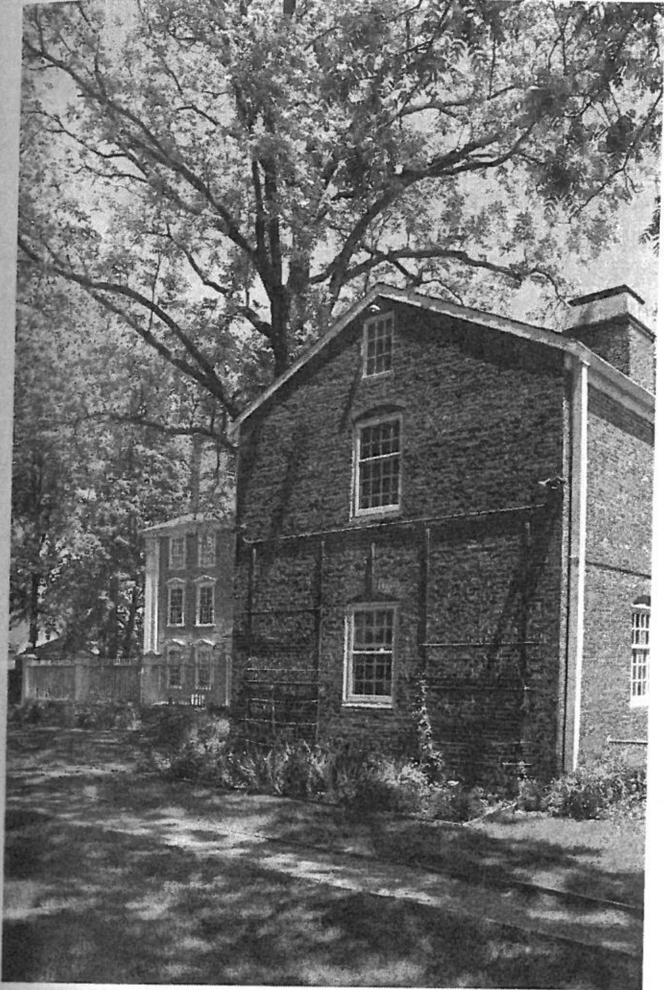

Figure 1.2. The Royall House (background) and slave quarters (foreground) were home to the largest slaveholding family in Massachusetts and to the enslaved Africans who made this lavish way of life possible.
Source: Theresa Kelliher/Royall House and Slave Quarters.

in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia; field hands on plantations in Connecticut and Massachusetts; blacksmiths in Rhode Island; and those who traveled to the Midwest and the West with their masters, where, among other occupations, many toiled on small family farms. There were full-fledged slave plantations in the Northeast—several of which are interpreted as such today, including Sylvester Manor, originally an 8,000-acre plantation on Long Island, and Royall House and Slave Quarters (figure 1.2), formerly a 500-acre plantation known as Ten Hills Farm outside of Boston.[7] Yet, most of those enslaved in the Northeast were not clustered on large agricultural plantations but distributed on small farms, in coastal cities, and across many households. In Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island, for instance, as many as one in four white households included at least one enslaved person by the time of the American Revolution. In Connecticut at that time, it has been estimated that "half of all ministers, half of all lawyers and public officials, and a third of all doctors" owned at least one slave.[8]

White Americans are also an integral part of this comprehensive portrait of US slavery. Many white people lived and worked alongside enslaved blacks, while the rest were, in

one way or another, enmeshed in economic systems based on complicity in slavery. The northeastern United States, for instance, sent out 85 percent of the nation's slaving voyages, and the infamous "triangle trade" and the colonial provisioning trade to slave plantations in the West Indies were important enough to the northern colonies that John Adams, second president of the United States, remarked, "I do not know why we should blush to confess that Molasses was an essential Ingredient in our Independence."[9] Slave-owning itself was far more widespread in the Northeast, Midwest, and West than the public generally suspects, lasted far longer than many recognize today, and was no less harsh in practice than slavery in the South. The primary economic impetus for the nation's westward expansion, prior to the Civil War, was the demand for foodstuffs produced for southern slave plantations. Finally, the national economic importance of southern, slave-produced cotton cannot be overemphasized. Cotton was the leading export of the United States from 1803 until the eve of World War II, amounting to 60 percent of all US exports at the outbreak of the Civil War. This economic activity enriched the South, certainly, but much of the vast profits from southern cotton production flowed north and west, especially to commercial centers such as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Cotton was also essential to the textile industry, which was at the heart of the Industrial Revolution, and slave-produced cotton fueled the textile mills in the Northeast and elsewhere that industrialized the United States.[10]

Slavery thus played an essential role in the history now interpreted at a multitude of historic sites throughout the nation, including historic homes, small family farms, commercial centers, industrial sites, and large-scale plantations. By interpreting this history, we can tell more comprehensive and balanced stories about our sites and about all who lived or worked there, including bringing out the voices of the marginalized. Just as importantly, we can expand visitors' understanding of the contributions of slavery—and of the lives of enslaved African Americans—to the political, economic, and social life of the entire nation. Finally, because slavery is a painful chapter in our nation's history, and one fraught with implications for our society today, there is tremendous value in helping visitors to understand that the institution of slavery wasn't merely the responsibility of the South or of a wealthy elite. It was a cornerstone of the nation's economy and society—and an engine of upward mobility for millions of American families.

Comprehensive Content

Comprehensive content starts with the recognition that the history of slavery in the United States is broader and deeper than our public memory generally acknowledges, and that far more sites have a historic connection to slavery to interpret than have generally done so. The brief portrait of slavery we have just offered might be used to inspire fresh research into the direct and indirect connections of any particular historic site to slavery. Comprehensive content also includes bringing the history of slavery to life through the power of individual stories, especially those that go beyond traditional slave narratives to reflect the historical agency of free and enslaved black Americans, and, here again, the broader context of slavery can be helpful. The stories of individuals who were enslaved can be brought to light with a conscious awareness of the full spectrum of circumstances within which the enslaved found

themselves in this nation, including geography, time periods, and occupations. Historical agency, meanwhile, can best be conveyed with a full appreciation of the ways in which slavery was experienced and resisted.

One basic rule of thumb when interpreting slavery is that in the United States slavery was not a monolithic institution. Its stories are wide-ranging and multifaceted. Each individual's story of slavery was unique. These stories must be set in a proper context starting with the individuals, spiraling out to include the site, the neighboring community, the state, the region, and the country. As staff research the history of people enslaved on their site, they need to be aware that generalizations of the "slavery experience" are neither appropriate nor compassionate. Audiences expect to hear affective stories of individuals—black and white, enslaved and free—set into the context of the history of the site and the broad historical context of slavery.

To do this, historians and interpreters need to think inclusively about the narratives their visitors will experience. In shaping these narratives, do not just rely on the historical "facts." Weave them into a compelling (true!) story. No need to embellish the past; it's interesting enough without falsifying or generalizing. Look at your landscapes, structures, and objects in a different way. How can you use them to tell a more powerful story? Based on your research, what was day-to-day life like? How can you help visitors to imagine the life of your plantation during its peak years of slave labor? These strategies and more can help in preparing an interpretation that will bring your history to life, open up new interpretive opportunities, and be more relevant to your visitors.

Our distorted public memory of slavery contributes to making this a challenging history to interpret, as does the fact that this story involves the painful invocation of episodes of trauma, violence, and oppression.[11] We believe there are two issues that make the interpretation of slavery (and similarly controversial histories) especially challenging for museums and historic sites: the ways in which this history invokes *contested narratives* and how *racial identity* influences the experience of interpreters and visitors. We address these topics in this chapter and the rest of the next.

Historical Narratives and Identity

All people, including site staff and visitors, have identities that define how they see themselves, how they make sense of the world, and how they interact with others. Although identity is in part individual in nature and in part based on specific roles we play in the social world, we are speaking here of identities based on membership, actual or perceived, in social groups.[12] These collective or group identities may include national, regional, and local identities, identities based on family or workplace, and identities based on race or ethnicity, social class, and religion, among many others. People possess multiple identities at any given time, and the salience of these identities will vary depending on life experience, with whom the person is interacting at any given time, and their emotional investment in the meaning of each identity.[13]

These identities, in turn, are largely based on *narratives*. The use of narratives, and more traditional concepts such as myth and storytelling, to explain identity has long been the

province of the humanities. Often, these were simple, even primordial tales, such as the flood myth that recurs in so many cultures.[14] Even specific historical episodes, such as the apocryphal tale of young George Washington and the cherry tree, were often short, simple stories with clear lessons. In recent decades, however, there has been an explosion of work in the social sciences on conceptualizing narratives as being at the core of identity:

> It is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities [and] come to be who we are.[15]

A portion of this emerging work on narrative and identity, especially in the field of psychology, has concentrated on the individual life-stories people construct for themselves.[16] In other fields, including sociology, history, and anthropology, however, the focus has been on shared, collective narratives.[17] Any given individual may have choices over which group narratives to internalize as part of their identity, but these narratives themselves are generally not held consciously and are "rarely of our own making."[18]

Collective narrative, or shared memory, "plays a major role in ... sustaining a sense of self in and through the communities in which individuals belong and relate to others."[19] This process is "not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened."[20] Indeed, the value of collective narratives is so great that they are "the key to understanding why people invest so much in retaining a certain identity."[21] Many of these collective narratives are about historical episodes, including grand historical narratives that are widely shared, on topics such as how the United States came to be, how families have prospered here, and about the nation's defining values.[22] "Historical narratives not only sustain shared memories, but also make 'a *social identity* explicit,'" by differentiating that identity from others.[23] In short, "our histories shape our identities."[24]

Historical narratives can be compiled directly from specific events, but they are also constructed from "schematic narrative templates." These templates dictate patterns into which stories should be shaped and provide the lessons or values that should arise out of each tale.[25] In the case of the United States, for instance, many national and subnational historical narratives are organized around such themes as independence, self-reliance, entrepreneurship, and the value of hard work and the American Dream. Think, for instance, of Horatio Alger's stories, which tended to follow a distinctive narrative pattern, complete with shared themes and outcomes reflecting classical American ideals. Just as people hold multiple identities, they can possess historical narratives simultaneously about their families, their regions, their racial or ethnic groups, their social classes, their workplaces, and their nation, among others.[26]

Narratives of Slavery and American Identity

In the United States, our limited public recollection of slavery contributes to historical accounts about the nation, its regions, its social classes, and its families and institutions in which slavery plays little or no part, aside from its role in the history of African Americans and of a few wealthy plantation-owning families in the South. This is true even for visitors

who may appear, on the surface, to know little or nothing about slavery. Even though it may seem as if "visitors at today's sites no longer come with as much—or sometimes, with any—historical knowledge," especially on a topic like this, there are powerful, but often implicit, understandings about slavery, or its absence, lurking at the heart of many American identity narratives.[27]

In the Northeast, for instance, many (white) Americans have identities based on stories in which their families, their region of the country, their socioeconomic class, and the nation as a whole found success without depending much, if at all, on enslaved labor. Instead, their identities usually rely on stories emphasizing themes such as self-reliance, entrepreneurship, free labor, and individual merit.

To put this in terms of family identity, for convenience, this is true of those from the Northeast whose heritage stretches back to colonial times: their narratives may emphasize small-scale farming or commerce, but rarely with any hint of the ownership of enslaved people or of economic activity dependent upon slavery, the transatlantic slave trade, or commerce with slave plantations in the West Indies, all of which were critical to the economic success of settlers in the northern colonies. Those whose families immigrated to these shores after the founding of the United States may have slightly different narratives, invoking perhaps hard labor in one of the Northeast's many textile mills, or discrimination against Irish or Italian immigrants in one of the Northeast's great port cities. Here, too, the narrative is likely to emphasize beginning with very little and making progress through free labor, hard work, and perhaps an entrepreneurial spirit; rarely discussed are the enslaved Americans who picked the cotton supplying the textile mills or who lived and worked in those port cities.

Antebellum historical narratives of families from the Midwest and the West, especially in the "free states," similarly tend to omit the presence, and the critical economic role, of slavery in these regions. Instead, the collective memory of these parts of the nation often focuses on families moving westward to farm a small plot of land or engaging in commercial or other economic activity in frontier territories. The reasons why Americans were moving west in those days, and the economic activity in which those regions engaged, prior to the Civil War, are conveniently absent from these narratives.

Many of these family narratives do incorporate slavery but not in historically realistic ways. Northern families, for instance, often presume that their ancestors were abolitionists, despite the relative unpopularity of that cause prior to the Civil War. Likewise, far more northern homes feature tales of the Underground Railroad than can be supported by the facts. Most significantly, those whose ancestors lived in the North by the time of the Civil War almost invariably seem to have internalized a narrative in which their forebears sacrificed dearly for the cause of emancipation, merely by fighting for (or otherwise supporting) the Union during the war. The fact that the Union did not go to war to emancipate the South's slaves (whatever the reasons the Confederacy went to war), and the highly controversial nature of emancipation in the North until the waning days of the conflict, do not disturb these often passionate narratives about families paying dearly for the racial sins of others.

Other white families in this country trace their ancestry back to European immigrants who arrived here after the formal end of slavery in 1865. For these Americans, historical narratives tend to focus on the themes of immigration: arriving on these shores with little

in the way of education or possessions, for instance, and having to work hard, often at low-paying jobs and in the face of discrimination, to provide better opportunities for children and grandchildren. In these cases, slavery is usually entirely absent from the narrative, and this often seems to be a point of pride when the subject of slavery arises at an historic site. These narratives have their own particular problems in relation to the history of race in this country—such as the fact that these immigrants, as low as their status may have been when they arrived at Ellis Island or elsewhere, were still afforded opportunities for advancement, for themselves and their children, largely denied to millions of existing (black) American families until the 1950s and beyond. Yet the history of these immigrant families is also entangled with the slavery of pre–Civil War days in ways which their narratives deny. For instance, white immigrants arriving after emancipation were afforded all of the advantages of a society that had prospered largely through the exploitation of slave labor. European immigrants also came here primarily because there was a demand for labor, and that demand existed in large part because of the crucial role played by slavery in the economic success, and especially the industrialization, of the antebellum United States.

Although we have been talking in terms of family identity, the elements of these historical narratives are by no means limited to identities based on family. Local communities and states throughout the nation, outside of the "slave states," tend to feature variations of these narratives, as appropriate for local history. The same is true of a wide variety of institutions, such as churches, schools, colleges and universities, and social groups, and of larger institutions, such as national religious denominations.[28]

In the South, where the memory of slavery is harder to escape, historical narratives tend to acknowledge the presence of slavery but also to make slavery irrelevant to identity for other reasons. Many white families from the South, for instance, have incorporated a historical narrative into their identity in which their ancestors were not wealthy plantation owners but were of more modest means. In this account, the implication is that the family didn't own slaves, somehow didn't benefit from the southern slave economy, and perhaps even are believed to have suffered from competition with enslaved labor. Those southern families who know that they were slave owners, finally, may believe in a historical narrative in which slavery was often a brutal institution but in which their family was an exception to the rule. In this narrative, a particular slave-owning family was kind toward their slaves, and in return their slaves felt as if they were members of the family. The narrative may even extend to examples of the loyalty of the enslaved, during slavery or in the aftermath of emancipation.

It is no coincidence, of course, that the nation's public memory leaves out the connections of most American families and institutions to slavery. Because our historical narratives form the core of our identities, we tend to prefer "tightly constructed," unambiguous narratives, and to select historical facts that promote a positive view of the groups (family, region, race or ethnicity, nation) with which we identify.[29] This is especially true of conflict-ridden or other "difficult pasts," when groups or societies are often driven to processes of selective memory and collective historical amnesia.[30]

It may be worth noting also that historical narratives are often very different for those whose primary identities are not white, or settler, or immigrant, or perhaps even part of mainstream, white institutions. Just as painful or difficult historical episodes may not fit with the historical narrative of a dominant group, these may be "pivotal moments in the identity

formation of sub-national groups," such as, in the cases of slavery or civil rights, the social construction of African American group identity.[31] These historical accounts, of course, not only include the history of slavery and racial discrimination, but they often follow different narrative templates, and surface different values and lessons, than do the nation's dominant historical narratives.

In fact, a primary reason for bringing the history of oppressed peoples to light is that "the narratives of excluded voices reveal 'alternative values' since narratives 'articulate social realities not seen by those who live at ease in a world of privilege.'"[32] Nevertheless, we must remember that all visitors, including those from nondominant groups, may have internalized some or all of our nation's dominant historical narratives as a core part of their *own* identities. This fact, though it complicates the task of interpreting slavery, is quite natural, because people often "incorporate for their identities the dominant story of the culture."[33]

Contested Narratives

Interpreting slavery well means exposing staff and visitors to narratives in which slavery played a much broader role in the history of the nation than our traditional public memory implies. As a result, staff and visitors will find themselves contending with narratives that tell how slavery was an essential part of the successes of the northern colonies, and of the northeastern, midwestern, and western states, and therefore of many white families and institutions that do not see their histories as intertwined with those of slavery at all.

This situation sets up a sharp clash between old and new narratives, which, because of the role played by historical narratives in identity, can cut to the core of a person's sense of self. It is not hard to see why this process is likely to be difficult and accompanied by resistance; after all, "struggles over narrations are," at heart, "struggles over identity."[34] Collective historical narratives are also created and maintained by many individuals, across diverse social and political contexts, and they are "preserved through social and ideological practices such as commemoration rituals, school and military parades, and national monuments,"[35] all of which adds to the difficulty of challenging shared narratives. This difficulty is not merely conceptual but emotional, too, and the emotional meaning of a collective narrative will vary with each individual.[36]

The challenge of confronting dominant historical narratives is magnified for painful histories like those of slavery—many Americans are reluctant to "confront painful historical episodes," and this is especially true of "racial histories" such as slavery or the civil rights movement.[37] We mentioned earlier the tendency of all people and social groups to avoid telling stories that reflect poorly on those they identify with, and surely slavery falls into this category for white Americans, and, somewhat paradoxically, for all who identify as American, including those who are African American or otherwise nonwhite. Slavery in the Americas, however, is more than merely a story of exploitation by perpetrators of injustice; it is also a story of violence, cruelty, and trauma virtually unparalleled in human history. The theory that the descendants of the enslaved are afflicted by intergenerational trauma may be controversial, but scholars are much more willing to entertain the idea that it is precisely through "collective narratives [that] there can be genuinely collective

traumas insofar as historical events cannot easily be integrated into coherent and constructive narratives."[38]

At heart, however, the challenge of confronting our society's dominant narratives of slavery doesn't arise out of the trauma inherent in the history. New narratives are "dangerous," that is, "disruptive to the status quo," to the extent that they subvert the simplified narratives at the heart of the dominant culture's understanding of group identities. The danger doesn't lie in particular kinds of historical memories, but in the fact of "remembering the past in new ways that are disruptive to taken-for-granted assumptions about a group's identity." This clash of old and new narratives is inherently disruptive and unsettling because individuals are forced to "establish new understandings of personal and collective identities."[39] "Any memory can become dangerous when it resists the prevailing historical narratives."[40]

Dismantling old narratives and replacing them with new, and historically more accurate, alternatives may be healthy and productive. But this process can generate resistance, resentment, or outright disbelief, and it requires careful thought and sensitive handling for a successful outcome. When people confront information that does not fit within the narratives that inform their identities, they tend to experience "serious mental confusion," "powerlessness, despair, victimization," and other cognitive and emotional difficulties.[41] The process of integrating a new historical narrative into one's identity, and reconciling it with core beliefs and values, is a gradual one, involving fits and starts, and is mostly an unconscious process.[42] It is therefore essential that an interpretive plan and staff training take this process and its manifestations into account, and that visitors be given plenty of opportunity to express their cognitive and emotional struggles as they absorb the interpretation.

The Learning Crisis

What does the learning crisis arising from a visitor's exposure to a new historical narrative look like? In general, this is a messy process. After all, "challenging people's self-concepts and worldviews is threatening because they often feel anxious, fearful, confused, angry, guilty and resentful."[43] The process is also inherently lengthy and does not always produce immediate, visible results, because rather than assimilating new information, piece by piece, learners are gradually building up an alternative historical narrative, which continues to conflict with the original narrative until the latter can be modified or discarded. We cannot expect that the learning crisis will be resolved quickly or that it will unfold in a linear fashion, or in precisely the same way for each individual. We must also expect that the learner will respond to new information from both "head" and "heart" when a learning crisis centered on conflicting narratives at the core of identity invokes both cognitive and emotional responses.

One very useful approach to thinking about the learning crisis was introduced into the museum world by Julia Rose, director of the West Baton Rouge Museum. Rose, drawing primarily on Freudian psychoanalytic approaches, has identified several stages in the engagement of museum staff and visitors with "difficult knowledge," such as that of slavery. These stages, which do not necessarily play out in a particular order, or in any linear manner, include:

- Reception—a willingness, especially initially, to receive new information
- Resistance—negative expressions in response to threatening information
- Repetition—the instinct to repeat information that can't be easily assimilated
- Reflection—an internal process of readjustment, often expressed through discussion
- Reconsideration—a willingness, later in the process, to express new views and conclusions[44]

Another approach, which can expand on this picture of the learning crisis for those facing challenges to deeply held narratives, draws on the concept of cognitive bias. Leon Festinger, a social psychologist, coined the term "cognitive dissonance" to describe situations in which a person receives new information that conflicts with a preexisting belief or opinion, thereby creating a cognitive dilemma. That cognitive dilemma generates psychological discomfort, and it will manifest in cognitive mechanisms, many of them entirely unconscious, to minimize or avoid the dissonance if the cognitive conflict can't be readily resolved.[45] The gravity of this cognitive crisis will vary depending on the context and the importance of the information or belief at issue. In the case of historical narratives at the heart of one's identity, however, the crisis is unlikely to be mild, and this fact raises the importance of incorporating an understanding of cognitive bias into the interpretive process.

What behaviors does a learner exhibit when experiencing cognitive bias as part of wrestling with a new narrative? Such a learner may simply ignore conflicting information, at least for a time. The learner may also actively reject conflicting information, often with no apparent reason or rationalization.[46] In the case of conflicting narratives, this may be true not merely of new information that directly conflicts with information central to their existing narrative, but of any new information that tends to undermine the broad historical accounts on which their identity depends, whether or not that information appears to be significant. In other words, the details of stories, and the general tone of historical narratives, matters.

Learners experiencing biased processing may also attempt to rationalize their existing narratives or to counterargue against the new information and stories they're hearing. They may attempt to justify their beliefs in irrational ways, such as by appealing to tradition ("that's the way the story's always been told in this country; why change it now?").[47] A learner's cognitive defense mechanisms may also include questioning or belittling the source, understood as the interpreter personally or the scholarship on which the interpreter is drawing.[48] Finally, a learner may engage in expressions of resistance that appear to delay the incorporation of the conflicting information, such as complaining about the unpleasantness or relative unimportance of the new narrative, making jokes or sarcastic remarks, or acting out physically by attending to other matters or leaving altogether.[49]

Cognitive bias, or "confirmatory information processing," is not a rational process, even though it is a cognitive process. Many of these behaviors are manifestly not rational, and there are other irrational elements to how learners cope with cognitive bias, which interpreters should strive to take into account. The learning environment, for instance, can dramatically affect the extent to which learners engage in cognitive bias rather than try to incorporate new knowledge and perspectives. In general, a soothing environment, in which learners are encouraged to focus calmly and constructively on disturbing new information, may be best for resolving the learning crisis. However, recent research has shown, counterintuitively, that

a tidy learning environment actually encourages cognitive bias, but a disordered or untidy setting reduces bias.[50]

Our focus on conflicting historical narratives emphasizes that the cognitive and emotional difficulties experienced during the learning crisis are likely to be largely unconscious.[51] This, too, has implications for how interpretation should engage, and respond to, learners. For instance, however deliberately obstructionist some visitor responses—such as resistance or denial—may appear, the visitor may sincerely be struggling with the interpretation—unintentionally, and likely without conscious awareness.

In sum, learners are likely to exhibit a combination of the following behaviors as they proceed through the learning crisis brought on by conflicting historical narratives:

- Ignoring new information
- Actively rejecting the new narrative
- Rationalizing the old narrative
- Counterarguing against the new narrative
- Justifying irrationally, as by appealing to tradition
- Expressing discomfort or lack of interest
- Questioning or belittling the source of information
- Physically disengaging
- Reflecting internally, or through external questions or discussion
- Repeating questions, concerns, or the new information itself
- Expressing a belief, at least in part, in the new perspective

It's important to understand that none of these behaviors are necessarily signs that the learner is rejecting the interpretation being offered. Rather, the negative behaviors are understandable and, often, necessary responses to a profound learning crisis cutting to the core of a person's identity, and, taken together, they reflect that the learner has not simply shut out the interpretation, but is engaging in the lengthy and challenging process of reconciling new information by internalizing a changed historical narrative (with all that this process implies for their self-identity).

Strategies for Interpreting Conflicting Narratives

What strategies for overcoming the learning crisis are suggested by an understanding of the role of historical narratives, such as those involving slavery, in the identities of staff and visitors? This process is, first and foremost, about guiding learners, not forcing them, as they are exposed to narratives that conflict with their core identities. As education specialist Stephen Brookfield puts it:

> Trying to force people to analyze critically the assumptions under which they have been thinking and living is likely to serve no function other than intimidating them to the point where resistance builds up against this process. We can, however, try to awaken, prompt, nurture, and encourage this process without making people feel threatened or patronized.[52]

In keeping with what we know about conflicting historical narratives and cognitive processing, the interpretation of slavery should embrace contradiction, conflict, and emotional responses in the learning process. This is, after all, how such learning takes place. If we are to take seriously institutional mission statements and professional standards that call for the education of visitors, there are simply no conflict-free shortcuts to interpreting challenging history.

The first step in embracing the learning process is to avoid telegraphing the conflict between the new narrative and traditional narratives visitors are likely to maintain as part of their identities. Psychologists believe that resistance to new information increases when the learner is forewarned that the information they will be receiving is likely to clash with what they already believe, or that the information will be presented in an attempt to persuade them to come around to another point of view.[53] So be honest, but don't frame the interpretation from the outset as being challenging to visitor beliefs, or as an attempt to bring them around to another perspective. Let them figure this out for themselves as the interpretation unfolds.

How, then, can interpretation play out in healthy and constructive ways? The single most effective technique for interpreting challenging history is narrative storytelling. Storytelling helps to ease listeners into the learning process, allows them to begin absorbing new information naturally and gradually, and gives them time to figure out the broader implications of the stories at their own pace. Narrative as an interpretive device is also less likely to come across as a deliberate attempt at persuasion than rhetoric is, and if presented with sufficient suspense, storytelling also helps to avoid telegraphing the conflicting nature of the broader narrative being interpreted.[54] Storytelling has the further advantage that it emphasizes the institution's authority by illustrating any interpretive themes (implicit or explicit) through detailed, factual historical accounts that visitors find intuitively harder to question than abstract statements. Finally, storytelling is perhaps the best strategy for engaging visitors in a challenging learning process that comes across, at least initially, as reasonably entertaining.

The extent to which narrative storytelling is persuasive depends, in large part, on how much the listener becomes involved in their own learning process while being *transported* into the story. To that end, the listener should ideally be fully engaged in the story, cognitively and emotionally, through strong and compelling storytelling and through feelings of suspense and the use of vivid imagery.[55] Here is one situation in which the importance of *affective equality* can be seen: encourage the listener's empathy with all historical figures, including both slave owners and the enslaved, to keep them fully immersed in the storyline.[56] This approach will help to correct the tendency toward affective *inequality*, in which visitors are often encouraged to relate emotionally to privileged historical figures rather than to traditionally marginalized actors. By encouraging learners to relate to all figures in a story, regardless of the visitor's identity or how we feel about the roles of the various historical actors, the learner will be more fully drawn into the story and thus more capable of overcoming cognitive biases impeding them from accepting the transformed narrative.

It is also important not to frame the interpretation of slavery as offering a new narrative to replace what may be the learner's dominant narrative. Doing so merely telegraphs the persuasive intent and sets up the cognitive and emotional challenge of reconciling conflicting narratives in the starkest possible terms. Introducing the interpretation gradually, through narrative storytelling, is one effective way to avoid such a jolting presentation, of course. Another approach is to frame the interpretation as building on the traditional narrative by

incorporating *all* American voices and experiences into a single, more comprehensive narrative, including traditional voices (with important modifications, of course) along with traditionally marginalized groups. To do this in the context of the story of slavery, emphasize the parts of the narrative that can remain the same; these aspects might include, for example, the role of hard work, free labor, and industrialization in American prosperity. These elements of the traditionally dominant American narrative can be reinforced in the interpretation of slavery, which will be reassuring to many visitors. To maintain historical accuracy and balance, these themes must simply be placed in an expanded context, introducing the role played by slavery in how many Americans were able to prosper through hard work, free labor, and industrialization. This broader perspective on the American story will, of course, be challenging enough to those who have internalized the traditional narrative.

New content added to the traditional narrative can often be portrayed as entirely consistent with the *broader themes* of the narrative. For instance, slavery, too, is a story of a struggle to survive and to prosper, of triumph against the odds, and a struggle for freedom and equal opportunity. These all-American themes can make the new narrative not only more palatable, but also make the story of the enslaved, and of other traditionally marginalized groups, a central part of the traditional American narrative.

Portraying slavery using these themes from the traditional American narrative also allows for the incorporation of uplifting stories, not just tales of suffering and trauma, into the interpretation of slavery in a natural and seamless way. These more positive themes, though not the entire story of slavery, tend to be more palatable for learners of all races and backgrounds, and they make for a healthier learning process. Turning back to the concept of schematic narrative templates, the portrayal of uplifting stories arising out of slavery (and the stories of free black Americans) will be most effective if inserted into the narrative templates most commonly used for this country's dominant stories. This means framing stories of survival, of resistance, and of freedom-seeking, for instance, in the narrative structure traditionally employed for stories of survival in the wilderness, resistance to British rule prior to and during the American Revolution, and resistance to segregation during the civil rights movement.[57]

It's important to note that stories of human suffering and trauma during slavery have their place in interpretation. These are compelling stories with ample human interest, in addition to being an integral part of a balanced and conscientious interpretation of slavery. Historical accounts of suffering are effective at disrupting entrenched historical narratives that reinforce division into different social groups ("us" and "them"), thereby encouraging empathy, the development of solidarity, and the acceptance of disruptive, unified narratives.[58] Our fears about the impact of these traumatic stories on learners, especially when racial divisions are involved, tend to be overstated. For instance, research suggests that teaching black and white children about historical racism has positive effects, bringing children together across racial lines, and that concerns about emotional distress tend not to be borne out. However, with material of this kind, having an opportunity for careful dialogue, in which feelings can be explicitly acknowledged and discussed, can help greatly in increasing understanding, easing racial prejudice, and promoting positive racial feelings.[59] In ethnographic fieldwork with Coeur d'Alene Indians in northern Idaho, one anthropologist found that historical narratives of trauma and injustice, transmitted across many generations, were positive in nature, offering individuals resilience and strength as part of their identities.[60]

There are other concrete steps that institutions can take to embrace the behaviors that visitors exhibit during the learning crisis. First, institutions must ensure plenty of opportunities for visitors to express their resistance to the new narrative they are being exposed to. This means that interpretation needs to accommodate the anticipated visitor complaints about discomfort with the unpleasant nature of slavery and their claims that the stories being related are false, or irrelevant, or unimportant to the visitor or to the nation's story. This also means accommodating and responding appropriately to the jokes or sarcastic remarks and expressions of disbelief, which visitors honestly struggling with conflicting narratives may offer up. The same is true of the physical responses visitors may engage in, including distracting themselves or simply walking away from the interpretation. Finally, the interpretive process should anticipate and embrace the repetition that learners in crisis are likely to engage in, in the form of repeating questions, their own statements, and those of the interpreter.[61] These are not necessarily rejections of the interpretation, or unhealthy responses, but are natural expressions of cognitive and psychological struggles with new information, especially in the form of conflicting narratives that touch on matters of identity.

Learners struggling with conflicting narratives also require opportunities to engage in a process of self-awareness, self-examination, and reflection in order to begin to resolve the internal cognitive tension inherent in the process.[62] As Julia Rose advises, historic sites and museums should provide opportunities for visitors to talk, to ask questions, and to express their reconsideration of the interpretation's validity.[63] Ideally, the interpretive process should be heavily participatory, with ample opportunities for visitors to engage in discussion and dialogue with the interpreter and with one another. We know that visitors crave such opportunities when grappling with challenging history as long as they are not forced into participating.[64] If properly done, with sufficient staff training in facilitated dialogue and techniques for questioning and responding to visitors, these opportunities will allow visitors to reflect, engage the interpreter, express their fears and concerns, be heard, and know that their concerns are seen as legitimate and are taken seriously. There are other specific techniques for encouraging visitor reflection and engagement, such as opportunities for visitors to add their own reflections to a comment box, on a wall, or in an electronic display system.

Another concrete step for the interpretive process is to provide for repetition. As we have seen, learners require repetition when confronting deeply challenging information and struggling with cognitive bias before they can begin to respond outwardly in conventionally positive ways.[65] Don't just mention a single, new narrative at one point during a tour. Instead, introduce that narrative early on, without expecting immediate, positive results from many visitors. Then aid those visitors by reinforcing the new narrative (repeating information often, in new language but with the same content) and by providing new information frequently (adding additional details or telling the stories of other individuals). These techniques, by repeating information and by coming at the history from multiple angles, can reinforce and support the natural tendency of learners in crisis to seek repetition as they struggle to assimilate new information and transform internal narratives.

There is one final strategy we offer for helping visitors to navigate the learning crisis brought on by conflicting narratives, and that is flexibility. No two visitors are alike: "what a visitor brings with him/her to the museum experience in the way of prior experience, knowledge, interest and social relationships profoundly influences what s/he actually does

and thinks about within the museum."[66] How true this is, especially when invoking history profoundly entangled with the narratives at the core of our selves—a history so deeply enmeshed in questions of racial identity. Institutions must engage with learners, as part of providing instructional scaffolding, in order to understand what they know and what they believe, and to respond accordingly. Adjust interpretation to build on the existing knowledge of visitors, to spend time on what they need to know or to work through, and to engage with their particular concerns and sensitivities. Visitors may not know exactly where their discomfort with the material comes from or what historical narrative they hold that is being challenged by the interpretation. This is another area where good staff training plays a critical role in helping interpreters to recognize not only the signs of a learning crisis, but also the elements of the traditional historical narratives that are often challenged by a comprehensive and conscientious interpretation of slavery.

We have phrased the advice in this section in terms of the visitor, but this guidance applies equally well to front line interpretive personnel (and to other staff and key constituencies). Part of staff training is going through the learning process described in this chapter so that staff can work through their own internal issues with the historical subject of slavery and its implications today. Another part of staff training is studying about the learning process, and how to employ strategies like these for addressing that process, in order to be able to interpret slavery effectively for the public.

In summary, we offer the following advice:

1. Embrace contradiction, conflict, and emotional response in the learning process.
2. Encourage learners to confront contradictions between old and new narratives; provoke them, but don't force them.
3. Avoid telegraphing the conflict between traditional historical narratives and the new narrative being interpreted.
4. Introduce the interpretation gradually, through narrative storytelling, and draw learners in using affective equality.
5. Frame new historical narratives as variations on traditional narratives, emphasizing all-American themes common to both, such as struggles for survival, freedom, and equal opportunity.
6. Balance the suffering and trauma of slavery with uplifting stories of survival and resistance, using traditional narrative templates for maximum effect.
7. Use the suffering and trauma of slavery to disrupt traditional narratives, encouraging empathy, solidarity, and the acceptance of broader, more inclusive narratives.
8. Provide space—physical, emotional, and cognitive—for visitors to express resistance in the face of new narratives.
9. Allow visitors to engage in reflection and discussion as part of their learning process through skilled questioning and facilitated dialogue.
10. Repeat information throughout the interpretive experience, and provide multiple entry points—different perspectives and individual stories—to reinforce basic information and themes.
11. Meet each visitor where they are, recognizing their unique perspective, their own internal narratives, and the role of their particular racial identity and preconceptions.

Interpreting

Slavery

at Museums and Historic Sites

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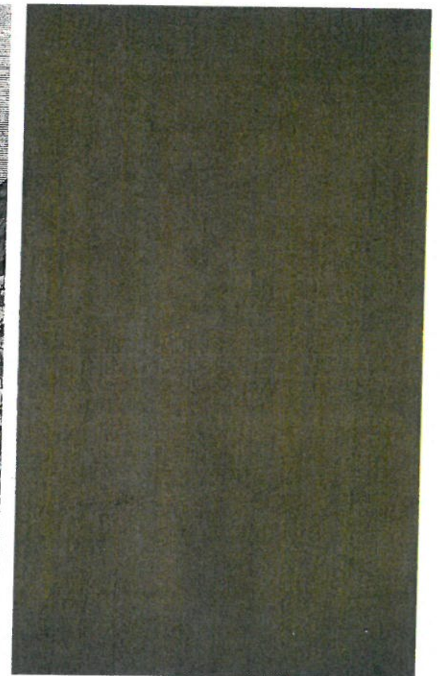
INTERPRETING HISTORY SERIES



CHAPTER 8

Perceptions of Race and Identity and Their Impact on Slavery's Interpretation

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EVEN THOUGH we may not be conscious of it, how we perceive ourselves and others is critical to how we frame our interpretation of slavery. As Americans, it is ingrained in us to identify as part of a racial group—such as white, African American, or Latino—but do we really understand the social construction of race, these identities we assign ourselves and each other based on the way we look, or on our ancestry, or our cultural affiliation? Racism, which exaggerates the significance of physical differences to assert the superiority of one group over others, was an ideology constructed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to justify slavery. We now live in a racialized society, "a society wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships."[1] Race shapes our perceptions of each other. How we, as narrators of history, are perceived by our audience, and how we perceive our audience, play a role in the delivery and reception of the narrative. The assumptions we make about one another's race affect our perceptions.

When it comes to discussing race in the United States, we are still trying to find correct ways to approach the subject. The Civil War sesquicentennial has given historians an opportunity to push the discussion of slavery forward, and some historic sites and museums have taken advantage of this period to devote programs to telling the story of the enslaved and their fight for freedom. Hollywood produced several movies that discuss slavery in some form, including the 2012 film *Django Unchained* (directed by Quentin Tarantino, a white American) and the 2013 film *12 Years a Slave* (directed by Steve McQueen, a black Briton of Grenadian descent). These films brought slavery to the forefront; however, there was

controversy in some quarters over who had the "right" to direct such films and who should be able to tell the story of the enslaved.

According to historian Ira Berlin, "the history of slavery mixes with the politics of slavery in ways that leave everyone, black and white, uncomfortable and often mystified as to why."[2] Uncomfortable or not, discussions of slavery can lead to more in-depth dialogues about racial identity. Cultural studies professor Karen M. Cardozo states that "we cannot meaningfully talk about racial identity without also talking about racism" and that "acknowledging systematic racism requires unlearning deeply cherished American myths of individualism, meritocracy, and justice."[3] That acknowledgment can start at historic sites that move past the narrative of white slave owners and take an active approach to talking about the white families who lived there, and about the enslaved African Americans who lived and worked on the property.

Visitors to historic sites and museums arrive with different expectations. Some may visit historic southern plantations with images of Tara and hoop skirts in mind and ignore the out buildings that housed African Americans. Others may visit northern mansions, commercial centers, or industrial sites, and expect to find only stories of free people. Yet there are those who come to these sites looking for the narrative of the enslaved labor force and their history. These institutions employ staff to interpret that past, hoping that they are able to make connections and engage the visitors, while providing teachable moments that we hope will last a lifetime. Sometimes, however, race and racial identity can get in the way of a teachable moment.

Race and identity play a large role in how visitors and interpreters negotiate public discussions on slavery. For interpreters, it is their job to communicate with visitors about slave owners *and* the enslaved people, and it is important that visitors look to an interpreter as a trusted storyteller, no matter what the interpreter's race. However, in practice, there may often be only a polite trust between interpreters and visitors of different racial identities, but between visitors and interpreters who share a similar racial identity there can be a higher level of trust. Black interpreters, for instance, may gain an "instant credibility" from black visitors based on racial identity, rather than on an interpreter's actual knowledge and skills in interpreting slave life.

The higher-level trust that can exist between interpreters and visitors of similar race or ethnicity is often explained as resulting from "in-group bias," in which individuals who share "racial, ethnic or other salient characteristics" find that "cooperation, trust and affection are most easily developed for other members of this in-group."[4] Of the many factors that determine whether any two people will experience mutual trust, scholars find that race is the most important. For instance, 70 percent of blacks report that other blacks can be trusted, but just 23 percent report that they can trust people in general.[5] Both black and white individuals tend to be more trusting of people of their own race.[6] This phenomenon, in which people are more likely to trust someone of their own race, is especially acute in situations where learning is taking place and where issues of authority arise. Both black and white listeners, for example, say that they are more likely to believe a speaker of their own race, whether that speaker is a college professor or a preacher.[7]

What happens when interpreter and visitor are *not* of the same race or ethnicity? We have just seen that, in general, there is likely to be a lower level of trust, at least initially. There are other dangers to in-group bias: white visitors, for instance, may look to white interpreters

to validate benign views regarding slavery or to avoid having to process feelings that arise while learning more about slavery.

The bias that a visitor may have toward an interpreter on account of race can be especially acute when the interpreter is black. I grant that there is little research specifically on the role of race in historical interpretation, but we do know that college and university students, for instance, are more likely to question the competence of black professors, and that black faculty members frequently experience challenges to their authority.[8] Even worse, black professors report that based on their students' preconceptions, they also tend to be quickly judged for what students perceive as any flaws in their logic or presentation, which could reinforce those preconceptions.[9] This fact is especially troubling when interpreting slavery, as visitors tend to be wrestling with what they are learning, which clashes with their preconceived notions about slavery, leading them to seek out ways to challenge the logic or sources of information on which interpreters base their statements (see chapter 1, "Comprehensive Content and Contested Historical Narratives").

One small bit of good news for black interpreters is that black professors are less likely to be assumed to be incompetent when their subject matter is related to race,[10] which presumably applies to teaching slavery or other African American history. However, the harsh reality is that nonwhite educators are especially likely to be assumed to be biased and incompetent if they are teaching a race-related subject and offer a perspective that differs from the dominant white viewpoint—a situation that, again, is especially troubling in the case of black interpreters seeking to engage visitors with views of slavery that may clash sharply with their preexisting narratives.[11] Instead of being seen as natural authorities on the subject of race in history, black interpreters may be seen as naturally biased or perceived as unqualified to interpret this subject. This, at any rate, has been the experience of nonwhite instructors teaching race-related courses in colleges and universities, especially at institutions dominated by white administrators and staff.[12]

It is the interpreter's job to break through all of these biases and create a connection with the visitor, so that they can understand, and begin to internalize, the content, regardless of who is presenting it.

When the Race of an Interpreter Matters: The Effects of Visitor Perception

"Why do you play a slave?" "Why do you keep bringing this up?" "White people can't be trusted to tell our story. They'll just try to make it sound better than it was." "Slavery just sounds better coming from someone who is black."

When it comes to interpreting slavery, as we've seen above, visitors may judge the presentation based on the race of the interpreter before any content can pass their lips. These preconceived judgments may sway a visitor's subconscious willingness to hear or reject historical information. Conversely, the race of the interpreter can be perceived as lending credibility to a historic site, or can take it away. Visitors, black and white, can be taken aback at the truthfulness of the history, but the race of the interpreter plays a large part in whether, and how, that truthfulness is digested.

Sharon Morgan, co-author of *Gather at the Table: The Healing Journey of a Daughter of Slavery and a Son of the Slave Trade*, states, "It is undoubtedly difficult for white people to observe a black person speak/enact truthfully what occurred in the past. For black people, it is hard to watch another one of us relive experiences that were so brutal and damaging to our psyche."[13] Visitors question why slavery must be discussed at all, and wonder when African Americans will "get over it."[14] Third person interpretation allows the interpreter to retain their modern identity and utilize twenty-first-century language, but it can still be hard for visitors to accept and understand the role of the interpreter as a conduit to the past. This lack of understanding can be made worse by the racial identity of the interpreter. The notion that white interpreters are looked upon as not worthy or without the proper qualifications to tell the story of slavery is a reality that must be addressed. The idea that a white person cannot be trusted to accurately interpret the institution of slavery, using third person interpretation, could stem from perceptions that some African Americans visitors have regarding how whites view slavery. By believing whites will "sugarcoat" the narrative, these visitors may use race to draw conclusions about the interpreter, and the historic site itself, before the presentation has even begun. There are also white visitors who believe that white people cannot deliver the story of slavery in the third person as well as black interpreters can. Tom DeWolf, co-author of *Gather at the Table*, states that after visiting Great Hopes Plantation at Colonial Williamsburg, he felt that the interpretation of slavery "doesn't work as effectively when white people discuss the lives of enslaved people. It's just not authentic."[15] Upon visiting Williamsburg, DeWolf was told that there would be appropriate (racially diverse) interpreters throughout the site, and he was anticipating interacting with black interpreters at Great Hopes. At Great Hopes he encountered one white costumed interpreter who was discussing the lives of the enslaved in the third person in a reconstructed slave cabin. The experience was disappointing for him.[16] His perception that the story is more "authentic" when it comes from an African American, I believe, leads to a deeper conversation about who "owns" this shared history and, in particular, about who is "allowed" to talk about the lives of the enslaved.

A common form of pushback from black visitors, against both black and white interpreters, is that none of us should be interpreting slavery because it is disrespectful to keep rehashing the past and because we should focus on the positive achievements of African Americans. On the contrary, it's important for all visitors to see what the institution of slavery was like. When a person stands where enslaved men and women stood and is confronted with the narrative, they gain a deeper understanding of that history. But that learning experience is most often improved by the presence of an interpreter, regardless of their race. As Sharon Morgan says, "Historical interpreters do a huge service because they transport us back in time as no inanimate presentation can."[17]

There are some black visitors who may understand that though a white person is interpreting "their" history, they don't have to like it and may have strong feelings against not only the interpretation but the interpreter. It can be particularly difficult for some black visitors to loosen the proverbial grip they have on the historical experiences of slaves. One African American woman told me in passing that when she visited Jamestown in Virginia with her daughter, she did not like her tour guide, because the guide wasn't black, and "how could she tell me something she knew nothing about?"[18] Similarly, an Internet commenter states, "You

don't honestly think that anyone else has been interested in telling our story do you?"[19] It is interesting that both women believe that the story of slavery is a "black story," instead of a vital piece of American history, which so entangles the lives of blacks and whites that you cannot tell the story of one without including the other. It is unfair to categorize white interpreters as not being interested in telling the story of slavery or as unqualified when it comes to sharing the narrative of slavery with visitors, in the same way that it's unfair to deflect all questions about slavery to African American interpreters.

Interpreters, both black and white, who are dedicated to telling the story of slavery using third person interpretation may find it problematic that they are judged by visitors because of their race before hearing anything they have to say. We know that race is a factor in museum staffing—79.4 percent of museum staff in the United States are white, only 11.7 percent are black.[20] This statistic, though it closely matches the racial composition of the general public, reinforces a concern often expressed by historic house museums—a shortage of black staff members can complicate the interpretation of slavery. They rely on the perception that black people are seen as more credible and as telling a more affective story of slavery. Some black interpreters are often looked upon as the logical choice to give voice to enslaved people. A visitor may expect them to be a more natural, logical, and empathetic channel for the thoughts and emotions associated with being enslaved.

This dilemma can almost paralyze some sites in terms of what site directors feel they can and cannot interpret, and it stops some white interpreters from talking about slavery at all, leaving the burden of the narrative solely on the shoulders of their black counterparts. Two examples of this can be seen in the experiences of Clarissa Lynch, a volunteer interpreter at Historic Latta Plantation in Huntersville, North Carolina, and Lisa Swetnam, a staff interpreter at Historic Brattonsville, in McConnells, South Carolina. Roughly 50 miles apart, both sites were slaveholding cotton plantations.

Clarissa Lynch, an African American, has seen white colleagues become wary of the subject of slavery because visitors will argue with them and demand that the interpreter apologize for slavery. The site has worked for years to find an appropriate way to discuss slavery, relying on staff member Ian Campbell, also African American, to discuss the lives of the enslaved. The site made national news in 2009 when Campbell chose three black students on a field trip to assist in showing how field hands would carry their burlap sacks.[21] After that incident, Lynch explained, Latta's mostly white volunteer interpreters were told to be cautious about the topic of slavery, citing a passage in the volunteer manual that specifically states that these volunteers should not get bogged down on the issue of slavery. As an African American, Lynch was supported as the main volunteer interpreter of slavery, something she said she received "a little too much support on."[22] Lynch portrayed Sukey, an enslaved cook, and visually embodied what some visitors anticipate when visiting a plantation. A black woman who knew what her role was (as a cook), and here was a site willing to let her portray that role: "It was a double edge sword of sorts. I loved the fact that Latta gave me free reign to investigate and interpret the slave experience, but the flip side to that was it did not encourage the white staff and volunteers to find a way to address slavery on a deeper level."[23] Lynch notes that, although she has enjoyed interpreting Sukey's life, as a volunteer, "I'm not around enough to expand Latta's discussion of all persons that made up plantation life."[24] With adequate training, white staff and volunteers could prepare themselves to handle questions about slavery.

Lynch and I believe that Latta could benefit from learning that proper training can make a difference in how slavery is discussed on the site.

One aspect of proper training for interpreting slavery involves providing opportunities for staff and volunteers to talk about their thoughts and feelings about slavery and to let them explore together how this subject can be interpreted for all visitors. If the staff are allowed to talk openly about their feelings on the subject, it may help them work towards a more open interpretation with their visitors. This training is ideally carried out with the help of facilitators experienced in both the history and interpretation of slavery, and in how to navigate sensitive issues of race and identity today. But this is also something that sites can attempt to carry out on their own. Lynch suggests, for instance, that staff and volunteers gather all of the questions visitors have posed during tours and have a training session that addresses how they can collectively give truthful answers without sounding apologetic: "[The institution of slavery] was after all the way things were at the time. But if you can tell the story in a way that conveys the human aspect of slavery, it does more to move people beyond thinking of blacks as just a slave. Visitors will begin to see human beings with families, friends and a community."[25] Preparing staff and volunteers to have this conversation with visitors empowers the interpreters to tell the story without fear, particularly at a place such as Latta. James Latta owned thirty-three slaves, but it is the life of Sukey, the cook, that is the one best understood. Instead of looking at Sukey as just an enslaved cook, the site could interpret Sukey's history with the Latta family, exploring what her family life was like, and what the community looked like for those thirty-three men, women, and children. For white interpreters who may face hostile questioning from African American visitors, by creating an approach of talking about the enslaved as people not as property, the interpreter gives visitors reason to pause and think not about the person telling the story, but about the subject of the story itself.

This training method would also work well for interpreters such as Lisa Swetnam of Historic Brattonsville. As a white interpreter, she has feelings of inadequacy and looks at herself as being less qualified to interpret slavery in the third person "because I'm white."[26] She can and has done third person interpretation discussing plantation life and the lives of enslaved people, but she says,

> Although I feel fairly confident that the information I present is accurate, I feel inclined to defer to an African American interpreter on the subject of slavery (also presenting in third person), if someone is available. That's just a personal quirk of mine and I'm not sure it necessarily has to do with race. If I were with a cook or spinner or gardener, who I perceived to be more experienced than I am on the subject, I would want to let them field all questions on that particular topic. And an African American interpreter, by default, spends more time interpreting slavery than I do, and would be more experienced, at least in my mind.[27]

For some visitors, Swetnam's inclination could be perceived as discomfort or avoidance of a difficult topic, but at Historic Brattonsville, the interpretation of slavery or any inquiry into slave life has been and continues to be passed to the African American interpreter on staff because they are, by default, perceived as the subject matter expert.

Breaking bad habits can be hard (and depending on one interpreter to carry the interpretation of a specific group is a bad habit), but this can be corrected, as long as interpreters are willing to learn and grow. Swetnam can work through her feelings of inadequacy by shadowing her colleague, Dontavius Williams, who is the only African American interpreter on site, and by working with African American volunteers. Presenting alongside them in the third person can help Swetnam become comfortable interpreting the story of the enslaved at Brattonsville. Instead of sending visitors to African American colleagues, Swetnam can ask black interpreters questions that she may have, and listen to how they interact with visitors, to learn not only specific material but also how to engage visitors. Although some black visitors may initially perceive her as unqualified, her knowledge and experience will speak for themselves. Historic Brattonsville could hold a series of training sessions for all staff and volunteers that allow them to explore their feelings about slavery and how to interpret it and also to share advice on how to address the challenges and challenging questions that come with interpreting slavery. Acknowledging that the onus of interpretation should not rest solely on the shoulders of black staff and volunteers is just one step in making sure that the story of slavery is presented by all in a balanced manner.

The race of an interpreter should not matter, but as much as interpreters want to say it doesn't, for visitors race and identity play a large role in how slave life interpretation is received. Historic interpreters who present in the third person understand that there are some visitors who will see them as representations of the historical figures they are talking about. Trying to live up to that reality can be hard for the interpreter, and it is frustrating to know that certain visitors have preconceived ideas about what they are going to witness based upon the race of the interpreter. Staff should accept that some visitors may be looking for interpreters who display the physical attributes *the visitors* consider important in those who lived in the quarters or worked in the house. To those visitors, it may be confusing to imagine a white interpreter working in cotton fields alongside blacks. I believe that this is why black interpreters have a perceived credibility with most visitors, and why their narrative is largely accepted as fact based on the color of their skin. It's not that the interpreter is any better than their white counterpart, it's just how the visitor pictures the site historically.

When the Race of the Visitor Matters: The Effects of Interpreter Perceptions

Many white interpreters find themselves cognizant that they are telling the story of the "other," and this can affect their interpretation. At the Royall House and Slave Quarters in Medford, Massachusetts, board member and volunteer interpreter Gracelaw Simmons notes that although the majority of their visitors are white, the site "probably gets more visits by African Americans than the average colonial house museum. I hope my tours are the same for all visitors; that said, I suspect I'm more carefully objective in presenting the facts of enslaved life at our site and less likely to share my own emotional reaction to the sadness of slavery when there are people of color in a tour group. I am more aware that I'm telling their story, rather than a generic (white) American story."[28] Simmons points out one of the more

common thoughts of white interpreters, namely, that they are not telling a generic story, but a specific story to a specific group, and sometimes to specific individuals. She also points out that interpreters are often taught not to share their own thoughts—"stick to the facts"—yet when the subject triggers emotions, there is value in letting visitors explore those emotions and in preparing interpreters to help them work through their feelings.

There are other challenges that white interpreters may have to overcome in order to be successful when interacting with African American visitors. A white interpreter may feel the need to overcompensate in presenting the story of slavery to African American visitors, because they fear these visitors will assume a white interpreter doesn't appreciate the importance of the history or its legacy. Chris Barr, of the Andersonville National Historic Site, shares that he "might feel a need to push the story of slavery harder to a black family to show that their history matters, when the family might otherwise be wary of a white person's interpretation."[29]

Tommy McMorris, group tours administrator at West Baton Rouge Museum in Louisiana, notes that "coming into a tour, both you and the visitor have life experiences, including those that are based on your racial identity that shape your opinions and your view of the world. While my job as tour guide is to try and put those preconceived notions aside to give the most objective tour, the visitor doesn't have that obligation. I have to find a way to pull them into the story and really engage them in order to create a healthy learning environment."[30] McMorris pulls the visitor in by changing his method of approaching the topic of slavery based on the feedback he receives from the visitor. He realizes that this feedback is usually filtered by the lived experiences of the visitor, and often those experiences are based on the race of the visitor.[31] Once the visitor is engaged, interpretation becomes more about the story and less about the race and identity of the interpreter and visitor.

Eric Leonard, chief of interpretation and education at Andersonville National Historic Site in Georgia, finds satisfaction in interpreting to black audiences. He finds that "black visitors are more interested and more willing to have an honest discussion [about slavery and the roles of slaves at Andersonville Prison]. It makes me more confident when I am more genuinely received by black audiences when speaking about slavery. White visitors are either noncommittal, or not interested if they hail from certain geographic regions or economic backgrounds."[32] Confidence in one's interpretation is important. If interpreters are comfortable talking about slavery, visitors often perceive this, responding by asking more questions and by pushing the interpreter to share more. For some white interpreters, validation from black audiences not only confirms their work, it allows them to make a connection with visitors based on the content of their presentation instead of their skin color.

Although white interpreters may see challenges and diligently work to overcome visitor perceptions, black interpreters that I have spoken to say they make few, if any, assumptions about their visitors. It's quite possible that being black lends comfort when interpreting slavery. Physical appearance alone gives them instant credibility with visitors, making it somewhat easier for the interpreter to engage visitors in discussions about slavery.

Emmanuel Dabney, of Petersburg National Battlefield in Virginia, and Dontavius Williams, of Historic Brattonsville in South Carolina, believe that race is not a factor in delivering their interpretations. When asked if he felt that race and identity affected his delivery, Dabney said, "No." For him, "History is history. The events happened whether you

discuss them or not; but to not discuss the events is a disservice to the people who lived those experiences."[33] Williams feels similarly, noting that the race of the interpreter has little to do with the presentation of historical facts. He went on to explain that some people are simply uncomfortable with talking about the issue because it is not "their" story and are therefore disconnected from the issue of slavery in general. However, this should have little to no effect on the interpretation of facts.

The experience of black interpreters with visitors can become more challenging when interpretation is presented in the first person. Mia Marie, an interpreter for the African American Historical Interpretation division of Colonial Williamsburg, has participated in many reenactment events in the first person around the United States. She notes, "I know that as soon as I wear an 1860s style dress, it will be assumed that I am a slave."[34] Those moments open up conversation, according to Marie, that allows her to dispel myths and highlight the strength and courage of enslaved women. Comments from visitors that stem from what Marie perceives as racial hang-ups can, at times, have an impact on her methods of interpretation, but she moves forward by sharing historical research with those visitors in the hope that her words will enlighten and provoke thought.

As an interpreter, I have had to combat the issues and racial hang-ups of those around me, visitors and fellow staff members alike. In particular, I have had older white male visitors demand that I go into the (reproduction) kitchen at Historic Brattonsville and make them

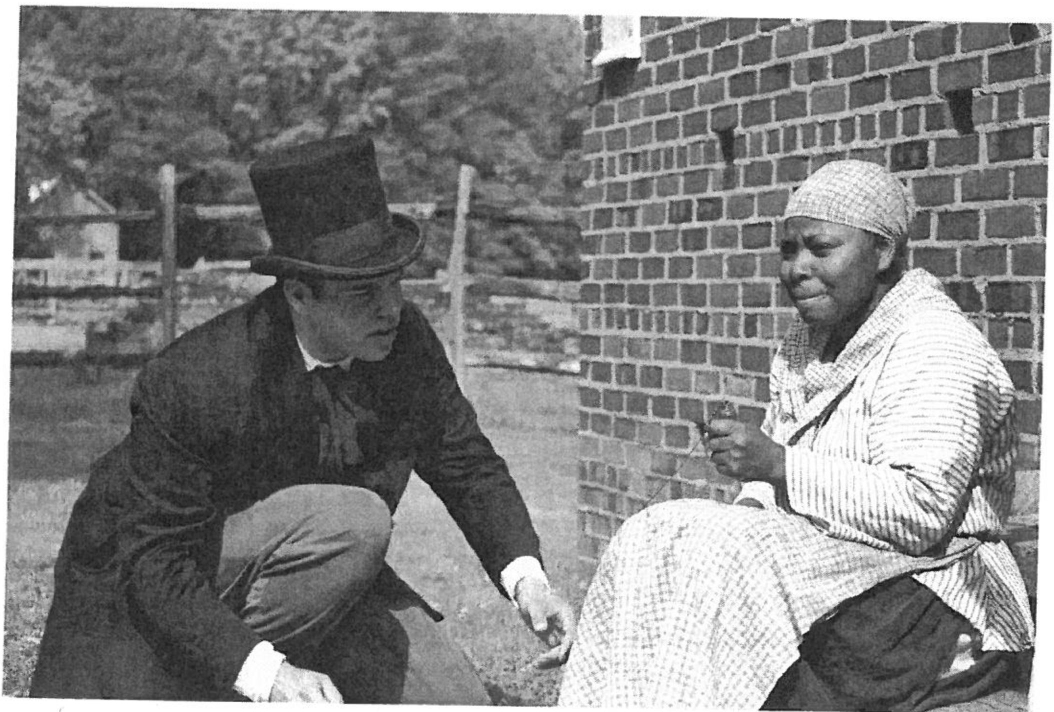

Figure 8.1. At Historic Brattonsville, interpreters Nicole Moore and Ryan York portray an enslaved woman receiving medical treatment from the plantation doctor for an ailment that prevents her from working in the fields.
Source: Windy Cole.

a meal, because, according to them, "that's what you're supposed to do." It amazed me that visitors would feel comfortable treating me as if I were enslaved, instead of a person participating in third person interpretation. After that experience, I became wary of older white male visitors, because I was uncertain how they saw me and what they expected. It has surprised me that in all of the negative interactions I've had with visitors, none have crossed the line into being sexually suggestive. When adults verbalize their issues and thoughts with you, it can be off-putting. As an interpreter, I've learned to shake comments off in the moment and help a visitor to understand why a comment is bothersome. But it's especially difficult to hear things like this from children. One day, while working at Brattonsville, a seven-year-old girl from England approached me and asked how much it would cost to buy me and what skills I had that made me valuable. I did not expect that dialogue, because my perception of young visitors was that they were curious about what I was doing, and whose life I was interpreting, but not that they were wondering about my worth. It's difficult to actually try to turn a moment like that into a learning experience; it takes careful training and patience to explain that even though I am dressed like a slave woman and could have possessed skills as a seamstress, cook, or handmaid, I am a modern person and not for sale. For me, there shouldn't be a difference in my interpretation based on the race of the visitor, but there is a need to adjust your presentation to address any issues visitors may have.

Meeting in the Middle and Trying to Get It Right

Historic sites or plantation museums, previously criticized for participating in the "symbolic annihilation" of African American history, have shifted their narratives to include slavery.[35] The West Baton Rouge Museum, in Port Allen, Louisiana, discusses the lives of enslaved men and women in depth at the Allendale Plantation cabins. The site currently has a specialized tour, "From Slavery to Civil Rights," that emphasizes the story of the slave community at Allendale Plantation during slavery and the local African American community after emancipation.[36] Laura Kilcer VanHuss, consulting curator of collections at Oak Alley Plantation in Vacherie, Louisiana, speaks of how the site has come to embrace the story of slavery: "Oak Alley has, over the last couple years, sought to shift its narrative by taking the interpretative position of: This is Oak Alley's History, its entire history. Prior to this shift, what was being presented was—as with many plantations—an incomplete narrative."[37] In Medford, Massachusetts, the Isaac Royall House board made the dramatic decision to highlight the central role of slavery in the site's history by changing its name to Royall House and Slave Quarters "to reflect a more accurate description of what the visitor would learn and encounter at the museum." Among other interpretive innovations, grant money was secured to "reinterpret the kitchen and kitchen chamber to more faithfully present the presence of the enslaved in the house."[38] As more sites develop exhibits and interpretive programs that reflect the lives of enslaved men, women, and children, visitors to these sites will experience the voices of those who have been silent for so long. But with the new narratives come the concerns over addressing issues of race and identity.

Interpreting slavery is not just about reciting facts or fretting over how you, as an interpreter, think the visitor feels about you because of your race. It is about the overall content,

the words, and the inflection of the interpreter's voice and tone. All of these things must be carefully orchestrated for optimal reception. If an interpreter changes their presentation to suit a particular audience, this does not automatically mean the interpreter or the site is compromising the message. Instead, this is about knowing how to get through to your audience in order to have the greatest effect. Tommy McMorris, of the West Baton Rouge Museum, understands this and works to make sure his tours reflect this thought process. "I will change my method of approaching the topic of slavery depending on the feedback I get from the visitor," he says. "This feedback is filtered through their worldview, which is based on past experiences."[39] Most often, these past experiences are based on the race of the visitor, and, as a white interpreter, he finds that he has to be careful "in my phrasing, selection of words and even tone of voice while giving my tour. Reaction to the difficult history of slavery can vary widely from person to person and the language and delivery of the tour can go a long way in making the difficult history easier to absorb."[40]

It may be beneficial to keep some aspects of your presentation the same, regardless of your visitor's race, but there are clear exceptions. For white interpreters, it is important to show empathy for black visitors who may be having a hard time with the interpretation. These interpreters must be able to stand firm when confronted with accusations of softening the past, but at the same time understand that the subject matter they are presenting is the catalyst for the hurt and anger confronting them. For black interpreters, it is important to understand that there will be white visitors looking for an "out," a way to affirm their preexisting belief that slavery was not such a big deal. This resistance may come in the form of defending slave owners, using the living conditions of some slaves—brick cabins versus log cabins, for instance—as a method of proving that slavery wasn't so bad. There will also be white visitors who don't know how to deal with the emotions that come with understanding a social institution that stripped its practitioners of their humanity. Being able to calmly and resolutely handle these situations goes a long way in getting visitors to explore different viewpoints, understand pain, and look forward. A common argument I would get from white visitors looking to deny the cruelty of slavery was that "blacks were not the only ones enslaved." There are comparisons made to the oppression of Native Americans and to indentured servants, so that it wasn't just a "black versus white" thing. McMorris relates that one visitor argued the existence of black slave owners proves that race and slavery were not intertwined. There are also visitors who have broken down in tears seeing me dressed as an enslaved woman, even though my interpretation was in the third person. As interpreters, we cannot control how visitors will respond, but we can respond to them and hope that our presentations will allow them to look further.

These situations may create uncomfortable moments for both interpreter and visitor, but they can be turned around to generate a lasting takeaway. The sweeping generalization that all experiences of slavery were the same can be particularly hard for interpreters to correct. If a white interpreter tries to explain that brutality varied across plantations, and that one slave owner might have treated those they enslaved differently from another, that interpreter may be accused of sugarcoating history. If a black interpreter tries to explain that even though some white women struggled with power, they still had more agency than black women, who were subject to coerced labor and often sexually assaulted, the interpreter may be told that they are "overreacting." In instances like these, the interpreter needs to be able to break down the generalization.

Laura Kilcer VanHuss notes that the staff at Oak Alley Plantation are encouraged to shift the conversation from broad generalizations to what she calls "scholarship supported specificity," meaning that the interpreter focuses on a specific topic within slavery and as it pertains specifically to Oak Alley: "Most of the 'uncomfortable moments' for our staff occur when a visitor makes a generalizing statement or assumption. The docent is trained to first acknowledge the person's position, relate it to what they know to be accurate at Oak Alley and then raise a question of their own. By doing this, they are respecting the visitor's query or statement, and then bringing the topic to Oak Alley and fostering a conversation that can move in a positive direction." An example of this would be a discussion about the living conditions of the enslaved. A visitor may insist that they learned slaves slept on dirt floors in run-down wooden shacks; the interpreter could acknowledge that there were slaves who lived in wood cabins with dirt floors, and then compare that generalization to the specific living conditions interpreted at Oak Alley.[41] During a recent visit to Oak Alley, a fellow museum professional found the interpretive story in the house to have very little specific information about slavery and nothing specific about individual enslaved people. Throughout the house tour, the only references made to enslaved people were generalized references of types of work done by the plantation's "slaves." The recently reconstructed slave cabins, which contained text panels with important content about slave life at Oak Alley, were the only places on the plantation where enslaved people were discussed in any detail or in a humanizing way. Unfortunately, only a small percentage of those visiting the plantation actually enter the cabins, which line the allée between the museum gift shop/café and the main house.[42]

Dontavius Williams shares an "uncomfortable" experience he had in being confronted by an older black visitor who was upset with Historic Brattonsville because the site tells the story of the 139 enslaved men, women, and children who once called the plantation home. Williams says this visitor sat on the porch of the visitor center

> and refused to go on a tour of our site because he did not like the idea of our site telling the story of slavery. After further conversation with him, I realized his opinion was not necessarily his opinion but it was the opinion that had been drilled in his head since his childhood. This opinion had shaped his view of white America in a very negative way. I challenged him to take my tour and told him that if he did not learn anything or view slavery/race relations in a different way that I would pay his admission out of my own pocket.

By allowing the visitor to express his concerns, Williams was able to show respect for the visitor's views and past experiences. This method of creating a direct dialogue "gives the visitor the opportunity to work through their discomfort and hopefully make them feel comfortable and listened to," says McMorris, who also utilizes this method with his guests in Baton Rouge. "By showing respect for what the visitor has to say, the visitor will then usually become more open and accepting to other viewpoints," as was the case with Williams. By the end of the tour, the "self-proclaimed militant visitor," Williams said, "shared that my insight and the information I presented to him changed his entire perspective on the subject, and he vowed to come back and bring friends who needed to have the same reawakening that he felt."

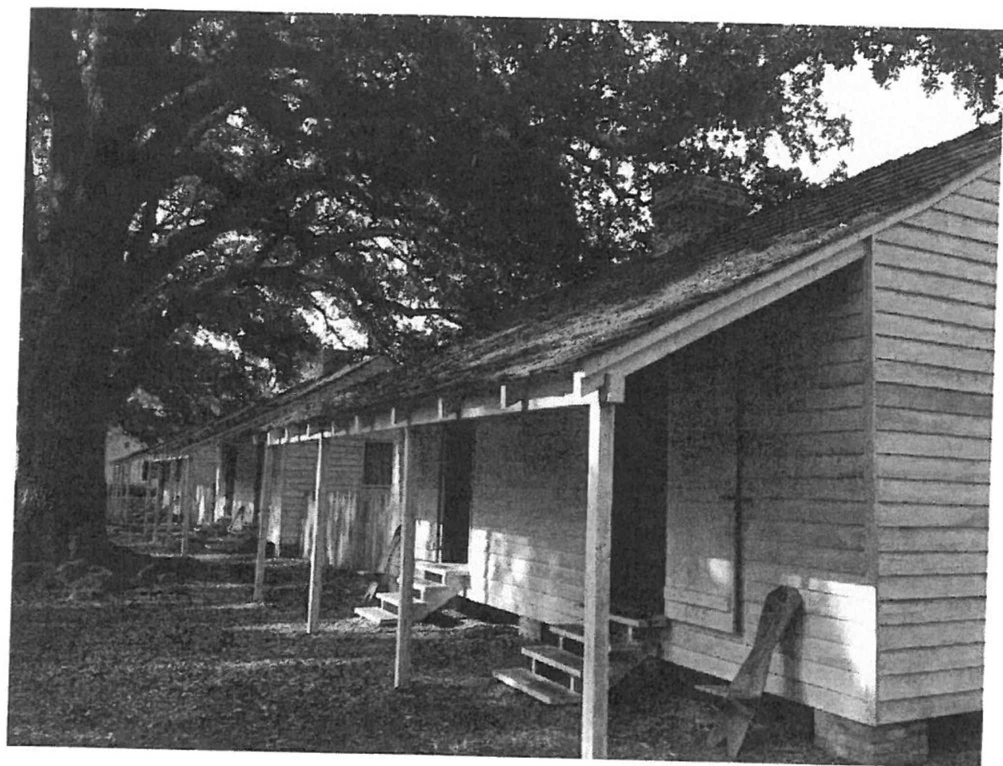

Figure 8.2. Located on Oak Alley's historic grounds, almost exactly where the original buildings stood, six reconstructed cabins give insight into the lives of the enslaved. Four of the cabins depict historic dwellings—a field slave's quarters, a house slave's quarters, a sick house, and a postemancipation residence—and two have been converted to exhibit spaces, inviting visitors to understand slave life on a more personal level.
Source: Oak Alley Plantation.

Both McMorris and Williams utilize tools that all interpreters should be equipped with. Not only do interpreters need to have professional training that can be provided by their institutions—knowledge of the history of their site, of the larger history of slavery in this country, and training in discussing issues of race—they also need to be skilled in how to lead a discussion about slavery. McMorris is adamant on this point: "The process of training isn't everything when it comes to the interpretation of slavery. Having the right personnel is essential. Not only does it take someone with textbook knowledge and public speaking skills, it takes an affable disposition, the ability to think on your feet, to be calm in stressful or antagonistic situations and, most importantly, the ability to read your audience so you can determine the best ways to approach the difficult topics."[43]

It also helps if interpreters have a few questions readily available to ask visitors during the tour. No matter what the race of the interpreter, there will be visitors who will ask antagonistic questions just to challenge the interpretation, particularly if visitor and interpreter are not of the same racial identity. However, pausing to ask visitors if there is something they want to know more about allows them to think about the material you've just presented and ask for clarification. Asking open-ended questions such as "How would you feel, knowing that

your family could be separated at any moment?" allows the visitor, no matter their race, to put themselves in the shoes of enslaved men and women, think critically about their surroundings and what those surroundings represent, and take hold of the history. Hearing the responses from visitors should, in turn, make the interpreter take note and understand how their presentation affects everyday strangers. You may not have shared past experiences based on racial identity, but at least you can create a shared experience in which you reflect on the lives of the oppressed.

As interpreters work to break barriers with visitors, it's important that historic sites also provide support for their staff. The interpreter is also working through their own discomfort, so it is important to have a safe, ideally professionally facilitated, space for them to talk about visitor interactions, how questions from visitors have made them feel, and how they feel about the history and legacy of slavery. In the February 2014 issue of *Public Historian*, Azie Dungey of the popular "Ask A Slave" Web series talked about a co-worker at Mount Vernon who had trouble judging the institution of slavery as a whole. She noted that she felt his reaction "may have been personal, from his personal family history that he was not comfortable confronting."[44] All interpreters come to the job having their own feelings about certain subjects, and slavery in particular can often make a workplace uncomfortable if not everyone feels the same way about the subject. Sites should offer the training and support to help staff build trust in each other and trust in the interpretive plan (see chapter 7, "Developing Competent and Confident Interpreters"). Not every experience will result in interpreter and visitor sharing a warm, fuzzy moment. Slavery is uncomfortable, but creating conversation around this uncomfortable topic can engage visitors in a way that they weren't expecting, especially if they had preconceived notions revolving around race. Instead of being passive bystanders, visitors become a vital part of the interpretive process.

Lessons Learned

What lessons can we learn regarding perceptions of race and how they impact interpretation?

1. The first thing we must do is to acknowledge that people arrive with their own preconceptions. Visitors have their own strongly held ideas, beliefs, and feelings. Interpreters must recognize this and help the visitor become part of the experience offered at the site. We do this in part by making sure our interpretive presentation allows room for questions and dialogue to ensure that visitors are engaged and involved in the interpretive process.
2. Sites must also provide adequate and ongoing training to all staff members so they feel confident when addressing challenging interactions with visitors. This training should (1) provide a safe space for facilitated dialogue for those staff members who struggle with finding a level of comfort with their interpretation; (2) share the latest scholarship with staff so they are aware of new trends and have a solid foundation of knowledge to strengthen their visitor interactions; and (3) bring in various workshops and guest speakers, such as our friends at the Tracing Center on Histories and Legacies of Slavery, to help staff engage with best practices for interpreting slavery.

3. Sure, it may be difficult, but try to put your own perceptions of race aside and focus on helping the visitor understand slavery and its impact not only on the early history of our country but on the United States today.

Getting visitors to understand our interpretation of slavery is one thing, but getting staff comfortable in presenting slavery is another issue. Not only does it take top-notch interpreters willing to get down and dirty to confront slavery and deliver its history truthfully and without compromise, it also takes support and proper training from their institutions. Whether at a plantation museum or a nationally recognized historic site, training on how to handle issues of race and identity, both from the perspective of the interpreter and the visitor, is imperative to a successful interpretation of slavery. The interpreter has to be at ease with issues of race and the complexities that race and identity bring about. It takes talent to transform an uncomfortable situation into a positive learning experience, without leaving the visitor feeling like they are wrong for their preconceived ideas, especially when those ideas stem from race. Certainly, interpreters must remain objective and respectful to visitors no matter their identity, but they must also remember that the visitor has no obligation to do the same for them. To acknowledge this situation and to work through it to create a teachable moment requires skill and a deep understanding of how race and identity affect not only the interpretation of slavery but also the reception of the information. Without careful guidance, interpreters are left to handle uncomfortable situations on their own—and that could lead to disastrous results. Instead, it is important that sites take steps to prepare their staff for these interactions. One of the ways to do that is to teach the interpreter how to embrace pushback from visitors and to turn that resistance into some of the better moments in their interpretation.

Embracing the varied experiences that racial identity brings to the field can only help interpreters grow and become more comfortable in presenting slavery with confidence and authority. The material may never get easier, but understanding how race has a direct effect in how the message is given and received can allow a "coming to the table moment" for both the interpreter and the visitor.

Notes

1. Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divide by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.
2. Ira Berlin, "Coming to Terms with Slavery," in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, eds. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (New York: New Press, 2006), 3.
3. Karen M. Cardozo, "When History Hurts: Racial Identity Development in the American Studies Classroom," *American Studies* 47 (Fall/Winter 2006),171.
4. Melissa J. Marshall and Dietlind Stolle, "Race and the City: Neighborhood Context and the Development of Generalized Trust," *Political Behavior* 26 (June 2004), 127.
5. Eric M. Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 107.