

Monuments of the Black Atlantic: Introductory Remarks

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Memory is the unforgetful strength of peoples; the future of a people can only be illuminated
when founded on the past.

Boubacar Joseph Ndaiye, Chief Curator, Maison des Esclaves, Gorée Island, Senegal

We speak so much of memory because we have so little of it left.

Pierre Nora, "The Site of Memory"

Despite the longevity of African enslavement in the Americas, it is only recently that the American public has begun to explore openly the nation's current and former relationship to human bondage. With Vincent Harding and other scholars of black liberation, we believe that the struggle began aboard the slave ships or "floating kennels" that in Paul Gilroy's words were "the living means by which the points on the Atlantic world were connected." These "bounded spaces, with limited and relatively set, though changeable populations... increased the likelihood of a successful revolt." Taking a similar point of view, literary critic Aldon Nielson, writing in his brilliant work on race and intertextuality, argues that "the middle passage may be the great repressed signifier of American historical consciousness."

The repressed memory of crossing lives not only in the academy and oral traditions, and in the stone walls of fortresses of Elmina, Cape Coast, and Gorée but in our liturgy and our spiritual and religious practices throughout the diaspora. Even the Atlantic itself holds its remembrance, as the *Henrietta Marie*, the *Whydah* and their sister hulks bear silent witness to our determination to survive. Informal shrines dot our sites of memory: candles, water and other offerings, like broken crockery on an ancestral tomb. And so we mark and tend our graves, for as far back as anyone's memory can reach, sometimes singing a spiritual or repeating a story that was "not meant to be told" in order to strengthen ourselves for the present journey. Like the mythical Sankofa bird, descendants of African slaves living in the wide diaspora created by the transatlantic slave trade are bearers of an "unforgetful strength" that endures and endures, manifesting itself in every aspect of culture. Black writers, artists and musicians in the New World have tested the limits of cultural memory, finding in it the inspiration to "speak the unspeakable."

In order to further explore and articulate this sometimes silent phenomenon, the Middle Passage Project of the College of William and Mary, in Williamsburg, Virginia in the United States, and the Collegium for African American Research (CAAR), based, at that time, at the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität in Münster, Germany convened "Monuments of the Black Atlantic: History, Memory and Politics," from May 24-28, 2000. Many of the essays in this volume were revised from papers given at that conference, which addressed questions of literature and culture, acculturation, creativity, psychology, music, art and politics, as well as historical research derived from quantitative data.

Unlike the previous Williamsburg conference on "Transatlantic Slaving and the African Diaspora: Using the W.E.B. DuBois Dataset of Slaving Voyages," held earlier, "Monuments of the Black Atlantic: History, Memory and Politics" did not privilege a particular set of quantitative data. Rather, it raised questions broadly, and across disciplines. Because of the international nature of slave trade itself, touching, as it did, five of the seven continents, and because of the diversity of experience arising from that fact, it was a broad conference, committed to an international and interdisciplinary approach. Middle Passage and CAAR Scholars from participating European countries were active in a series of four planning meetings in Germany, the United States, and Canada, and the conference itself drew participants from as

far away as Brazil, Curacao, Ghana, Denmark, France, Jamaica, Nigeria, and, of course, Germany. Altogether, more than 25 countries answered an impressive "Roll Call of Nations."

The conference itself was international in focus, but grounded in the context. So far as we know, slavery on the North American continent began in Virginia, which has been called America's "mother slave state," and it was appropriate that this conference be held in Williamsburg, virtually a stones throw from the location where the first Africans landed in Virginia before the Puritans landed at Plymouth Rock. Held on the historic and beautiful campuses of the College of William and Mary, founded in Williamsburg in 1693, and Hampton University, one of America's oldest historically Black universities, in Hampton, Virginia, with support from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy, the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, and the Wendy and Emery Reeves Center for International Studies at William and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the conference found a balance.

The dual venues – one historically white since the late 17th century, and one founded after emancipation to educate former slaves – epitomize the unique history of Virginia with regard to African American culture. In her welcoming remarks at the Hampton University Museum, Gillian Cell, Provost of the College of William and Mary, highlighted the appropriateness of the Hampton University Museum as the venue for the opening of the conference. Guests listened to live jazz and dined on regional delicacies of the Chesapeake while awaiting their guided viewing of original works by Henry O. Tanner, Edward Bannister, Aaron Douglas, Augusta Savage, and Elizabeth Catlett within the museum itself. The audience was predictably diverse, bringing together scholars, teachers, students, museum educators, writers and artists.

During these four days in May 2000, "Monuments of the Black Atlantic" emerged as a forum for the sharing of academic research among scholars and a vehicle for expanding knowledge about slavery into the public sphere. Indeed, *Monuments* incorporated diverse voices in recognizing the historical importance of memory, and in issuing a call for broad collaboration and cooperation in 21st-century African American scholarship.

In a keynote address, artist Tom Feelings, artist and author of the highly acclaimed book *Middle Passage*, spoke about the more than twenty years research, experimentation and reflection that led him to the fruition of this extraordinary book. Offering another view of the slave trade, Phillip Morgan, author of *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the 18th Century Chesapeake and Low Country*, offered quantitative data on the transatlantic slave trade, spawning a lively luncheon debate. But the emphasis was on things that are arguably more difficult to measure. Geneviève Fabre, of the Sorbonne University in Paris, whose work on history and memory in the African diaspora is well known, focused on history and commemoration and the ways in which New World people of African descent have chosen to memorialize slavery, both publicly and privately.

Musician and composer Stanley Cowell both performed and demonstrated the links between contemporary African American piano styles and the African marimba, or thumb piano. Another featured speaker, ethnographer Joe Opala, showed his films *Family Across the Sea* and *The Language You Cry In*, documenting linguistic and cultural links between low country culture in the United States and West Africa. Opala's slide lecture traced "the Gullah connection," the long historical strand from Sierra Leone, to South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and finally, to Oklahoma, Texas and Mexico. Monifa Love spoke about "Passages Through the Middle," and other middle passage inspired works by her sculptor husband, the late Ed Love. And Artist Mushana Ali showed an original film and talked about the Middle Passage memorial she created with the help of homeless youths in an abandoned hospital during her year as a Fulbright Fellow in the Ivory Coast. Another highlight was a tour of the reconstructed slave quarter at the Carter's Grove plantation administered and interpreted by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Altogether, three days of panels brought together individuals from such diverse disciplines as religion, anthropology, education, literature, film and economics. The essays gathered here, under the title *Monuments of the Black Atlantic: Slavery and Memory*, were solicited from various participants in the conference with an eye to eventual publication in this volume.

To illustrate that the search for the manifestations and meanings of the black Atlantic experience is ongoing and continuous, this volume of essays is framed by two very personal quest narratives – Robert Hinton’s pilgrimage into black life and history in Salvador, Bahia, and David G. Nicholls’ encounter with African Americana at Gorée and on the streets of Dakar.

Robert Hinton’s “Bahia and the Academic Tourist” is one African American scholar’s effort to make sense out of impressions he accumulated during a five-week visit to Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, in the summer of 1996. This piece is part of a larger project to study the distribution of privilege in African Atlantic societies around positions of class, gender, and complexion. Finding himself redefined from *black* to *mulatto* in Bahia, Robert Hinton is searching for the appropriate analytical tools with which to do a truly comparative study of the construction of black identities in Europe and the Americas, and the part played by different notions of *Africa* in that process.

In her essay “‘When We with Magic Rites the White Man’s Doom Prepare’: Representations of Black Resistance in British Abolitionist Writing During the Era of Revolution” Kirsten Raupach examines the multi-faceted representations of slave resistance in British antislavery texts as a reaction to the revolutionary events in France and the colonies, with a special emphasis on female abolitionist writing. The various plays, novels and poems written in support of the antislavery campaign in Britain reflected a dawning sense that imperial control as well as domestic authority were increasingly more difficult to maintain. Representations of black revolution were employed to discuss questions of national identity and to address pressing domestic concerns, such as issues of social stability and prevailing gender hierarchies. Raupach insists that antislavery writing of the 1790s must be relocated in the changing social and economic order of Britain just as it needs to be read against the political background of shifting colonial power-relations. From yet another perspective, Raupach’s focused interrogation of antislavery writing by British women further complicates the rhetoric of slave revolution: the ambivalence of their double role as colonizer and subjugated other added subtle and often provocative twists to the antislavery discourse. From its earliest stage British women’s abolitionist writing was characterized by a close interconnection of feminist and antislavery concerns. A closer look at those female abolitionists who “wrote revolution” during a period of shifting imperial and domestic relations thus reveals equally complex and ambivalent messages about femininity and race.

“‘Mask in Motion’: Dialect Spaces and Class Representation in Frederick Douglass’ Atlantic Rhetoric” by Fionnghuala Sweeney argues that Frederick Douglass’ relationship to the United States and the abolitionist movement was profoundly changed during his tour of Ireland and Britain in the years 1845-47. This period of Douglass’ life is also characterized by his presentation of a populist, performative self, frequently at odds with the profile of the universal individual of western liberal discourse, in whose image he has frequently been posited. The essay focuses on Douglass’ non-literary production and the performative techniques he opted for during the early stages of his career. These performances operate on the interface of various discursive structures, both national and international, including those of class, race and colonialism. His rhetorical debt to the African American vernacular and the burgeoning working class form of blackface minstrelsy emerges in an examination of the cross-cultural, transatlantic dynamics of representation and social control in the nineteenth century. Douglass’ articulation of dialect spaces in particular illustrates his capacity to manipulate contemporary modes of representation, including white working-class forms of

popular entertainment, while his engagement with blackface minstrelsy sees him revising the form's representative categories. His use of particular cultural material and contexts, however, also illustrates the complexity and diversity of representational politics in the broader Atlantic arena.

"'From the Nature of Things': The Influence of Racial, Class and Gender Proscriptions on the Collective Memory of Harriet Tubman" by Kate Clifford Larson offers a new and exciting look at Harriet Tubman, one of the most famous women in American history. Referred to as "Moses" in her time, Tubman was an escaped slave best known for her role as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Her many accomplishments, however, have been muted and reconfigured in the service of prevailing agendas, redefining her identity as an historical actor. Decades of juvenile biographies have only served to perpetuate a mythological image of a woman about whom we know so little. Under the influences of racism and gender proscription, many details of Tubman's long and varied life have been obscured and muted. By illuminating the patterns of neglect and complacency expressed in the many guises of entrenched racism, political expediency, and racialized gender expectations that have dimmed and erased Tubman's true life story, Larsen's essay challenges and overcomes this limited historical memory that has more in common with myth than reality.

In "John S. Jacobs' 'A True Tale of Slavery' and Harriet Jacobs' *The Deeper Wrong: A Brother's Story*" Jean Fagan Yellin gives us a pioneering analysis of John S. Jacobs' "A True Tale of Slavery," a narrative published in London in February 1861 – a brief month after *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by his sister Harriet Jacobs had appeared in Boston. When he wrote his narrative, John S. had been an abolitionist activist for years. Then, after passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, he had left the country to try his luck in the gold fields of California and of Australia, and later returned to the sea, shipping out of London. Late in 1860, with his sister's book finally about to appear, John S. – who was working with the London Emancipation Committee to build antislavery sentiment in Britain – arranged for his slave narrative to appear in a popular journal. His treatment of his sister's story differs in important ways from hers. Where *Incidents* dramatizes the struggle of a female slave who was excluded from the category of True Womanhood because her status forbade her to practice the piety, purity, and domesticity required of women, "A True Tale" handles her story differently while giving voice to a male slave who was not permitted to assume that responsibility for his family that was required of men. After the 1861 Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, Harriet Jacobs sent a copy of her narrative to her brother's activist friends in London. They arranged for its appearance as *The Deeper Wrong: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. During the Civil War, both Jacobs's narrative and that of her brother were used as ammunition in the British abolitionists' battle to win support for the Union cause.

Elizabeth Keckley's memoir, *Behind The Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, published three years after Lincoln's assassination, was predictably attacked by mainstream journalists. These white writers could not abide the notion of a black woman writing up her observations of the Lincoln White House, Jennifer Fleischner documents in "When Bridget or Dinah Takes to Writing Books Instead: Reactions to Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes*." Keckley's narrative ambition extended beyond the types of memoir already available to black writers – slave narrative, spiritual narrative, up-from-slavery narrative. To understand how it was read, we should view her work in the context of the biographies and recollections of Abraham Lincoln (and often his family) that were already being published by 1868. Indeed, it is Elizabeth Keckley's ambition as an historian of the Lincoln White House, and her sense of herself as a truth-telling observer of white people, that is her narrative's most striking feature. Certainly, it was this narrative point of view that was most irritating to her Euro-American contemporaries.

If race and class were overriding categories of social distinction in nineteenth-century American society, they certainly figured less in the multicultural environment of seagoing

vessels, Klaus Benesch contends in “Melville’s Black Jack: *Billy Budd* and the Politics of Race in 19th-Century Maritime Life.” The gruesome regime aboard a whaler, a man-of-war or a merchant ship notwithstanding, seafaring occupations offered access to a world that tolerated racial difference to a far greater extent than even the most liberal of the Northern States. In light of recent studies of the life of black seamen among predominantly white crews, Benesch takes a fresh look at the representation of African American sailors in nineteenth-century maritime literature, in particular, Herman Melville’s unfinished manuscript *Billy Budd, Sailor*. Melville’s description of a “noble” black sailor in the opening chapter sets the stage for a thoroughgoing inquiry into the tangled relations of race and modernity and it helps to envision a truly egalitarian society in which racial boundaries have become – at least temporarily – suspended.

As Sylviane A. Diouf illustrates in “African Muslims in Bondage: Realities, Memories and Legacies,” West African Muslims formed from 10 to 15 percent of the enslaved population in the Americas and the Caribbean. By the end of slavery in the late 1880s, close to four hundred years of continuous Muslim presence had left its mark on the religions and cultures of the American continents. This paper explores two Muslim traditions – charity and Islamic protections, and their related terminology – brought over the Atlantic by African Muslims. It documents that they not only helped them nurture their faith, keep their communities together, and promoted resistance; they also influenced the cultural and religious lives of several non-Muslim communities. These traditions live on today as components of the cultures of the African Diaspora. Diouf surveys the reasons for the “lost memory” of the Africans’ descendants who continue to use Arabic terminology and Islamic traditions without knowing their origin and significance; she also looks at other manifestations of Islamic culture. The paper argues that the study of the Muslim community and of some of its traditions contributes to prove that religions and cultural habits did not just “survive” but were deliberately developed, maintained, nurtured, reinforced, and shared, sometimes at great personal and communal cost. It also shows that Islam could survive outside the transculturation process for several centuries, although it ultimately disappeared in its orthodox form as brought by the Africans.

Angelika Krüger-Kahloula’s “History, Memory, and Politics Written in Stone: Early African American Grave Inscriptions” looks at a number of typical and exceptional gravestones erected for or by African Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Local custom or personal inclination induced some slave owners and long-time employers of black servants to commission memorials for those who could not have bought professionally carved tombstones at their own expense. Most of the inscriptions use euphemisms for chattel slavery and praise the servants’ faithfulness. Since the epitaphs rarely fail to mention the owner’s name, the master’s benevolence is recorded along with the vital data of the deceased. Very few inscriptions found on gravestones take issue with the institution of slavery, but when they do, they are highly eloquent. Reversing the doctrine of African savages who need to be saved from a fate more cruel by being led into American slavery, several epitaphs do not hesitate to point out that Africa once meant freedom and elevated social status and that the tenets of proslavery rhetoric are at odds with the ideas of the American Revolution. The documentary value of these tombstones and their symbolic importance are hard to assess. As outdoor monuments found in public spaces, they are endangered by human carelessness and by the effect of weathering enhanced by industrial pollution.

Carla L. Peterson’s “Remembering the Past, Inventing the Future: Black Family and Community in Nineteenth-Century New York City” focuses on the antebellum careers of two black New Yorkers, Peter Guignon (1813-1885), Peterson’s paternal great-great-grandfather, and his son-in-law (and her great-grandfather), Philip Augustus White (1824-1891). It is part of a larger project, the premise of which is that family history provides a fruitful pathway to public history. Peterson focuses on these two men because, taken together, their lives span

almost the entire nineteenth century, and they exist in the public record to a much greater degree than other family members. The study is neither a memoir of her father's family nor conventional social history; rather, it is a narrative that lies somewhere between the two. Peterson places family biography in the service of opening a window onto a broader social panorama – that of the creation and consolidation of communities of African American social activists, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals in nineteenth-century New York of which Guignon and White are exemplars. The essay is grounded in ideas of collective memory. Both historians of New York City and black families from the city (Peterson's included) have for very different reasons chosen to "forget" the history of nineteenth-century black New Yorkers. In contrast, as they worked to build community, nineteenth-century black New Yorkers (Guignon and White included) turned to the past to seek out and preserve collective memories of significant events – for example the African slave trade – that had shaped their lives. Yet they, like so many other subordinated groups across place and time, were also and equally invested in inventing a future for themselves, in becoming modern citizens of a modern nation. Paradoxically, they recognized that they could achieve this goal only through the work of separate black institutions – political and literary societies, educational organizations, and the church. These same institutions then also served as sites of memory through which black New Yorkers engaged in acts of collective remembering and created memories of the future.

"Self-Evident Truths: Love, Complicity, and Critique in Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* and *The President's Daughter*" is Cherise A. Pollard's re-reading of the rumored affair between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson that has perplexed historians and fiction writers across the color line. The texts surrounding the affair are key elements in a complex historical debate that is central to conceptualizations of Jefferson's legacy as one of America's Founding Fathers. Pollard offers a detailed examination of the major fictional responses to the historical debate written by Barbara Chase-Riboud; it explores the manner in which embedded discourses of race, sex, and equality operate within both early national and late twentieth-century historical narratives about the liaison. She also discusses the ways in which contemporary cultural politics have influenced later twentieth-century critics' expectations regarding Chase-Riboud's depiction of the relationship, and she challenges contemporary critics to approach the author's representations of romance and enslavement from a perspective that honors the text's complexity.

The development of novels of slavery set in the nineteenth century (e.g. *Jubilee*, *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*) shows a clear move away from inquiring twentieth-century persons' family histories and towards the creation of conceptual spaces in which these stories can become "sites of memory" for broader, more diverse audiences. In contrast, novels dealing with twentieth-century confrontations with the legacies of slavery (e.g. *Corrigidora*, *Kindred*, *The Chaneyville Incident*, *Stigmata*) return the project of imaginative remembrance to individual family contexts. Stefanie Sievers argues in "Embodied Memories – Sharable Stories? The Legacies of Slavery as a Problem of Representation in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*." The most important, most emotionally charged work that still needs to be done, these texts imply, is to come to terms with one's own familial, generational connections, and this is presented as a primarily "private" inquiry. It is individualized especially in texts like *Stigmata* that use physical manifestations of slavery's violence on twentieth-century bodies as expressions of the urgency of this confrontation. While this appears to be an effective metaphor for the still strong links between past and present, it also limits the potential of the characters' individual memory work to turn into sharable, "public" stories.

Finally, David G. Nicholls' "African Americana in Dakar's Liminal Space" resumes the quest motive that already defined Hinton's search for meaning in the Black Atlantic. Historically linked to the United States through the transatlantic slave trade, the West African city of Dakar, Senegal, which Nicholls visited, is now one of the key pilgrimage sites for

those seeking to understand the historical ramifications of this trade. This essay examines how three public spaces in Dakar encode this transnational relationship. The first, the House of Slaves on Gorée Island, has official status as a UNESCO World Heritage site and has come to be the world's most significant place for remembering the slave trade. The analysis compares allegorical and historical readings of the house's meaning, paying particular attention to how American racial distinctions are imported here to shape commemorative acts. The essay then examines a second public space, the tourist markets abutting the house that feature African Americana – memorabilia designed to attract African American buyers by featuring Afrocentric iconography. Finally, Nicholls investigates the “space of transit” – the crowded streets and markets in which vehicles and people engage in vernacular appropriations of numerous icons and slogans, many of them derived from US popular culture. He raises broad questions about the role of race in the shaping of memory in transnational public culture.

The desperate need, the unbearable pain, the torturous triumph, the sensuous joy that accompany and define the processes of recovering the fragmented, silenced, screaming memories of slavery – who could express them more poignantly than Toni Morrison's slave protagonist Sixo in his declaration of love to the Thirty-Mile Woman? “She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order.”