

Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museum and Historic Sites

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Interpreting African-American history at historic sites is an essential but often complicated task. This timely and important volume seeks to improve and suggest successful plans for historical interpretation, and contains nearly two dozen essays spanning from the colonial period to the 21st century. It embraces a myriad of research methods and strategies for interpretation, including the use of social media, archival and documentary research, outreach programmes as well as instructing interpreters how to manage conflict and difficult questions. The diverse collection comprises essays by historians, educators, directors and graduates, since the 'best interpretation is done as a collaboration' (p. xvi). Whilst the book celebrates exhibitions and other public history programmes, there is still a concession that this work is not finished.

This is something I found all too clear when I travelled around the Deep South in the summer of 2013. I visited some fantastic exhibitions and museums dedicated to African-American history, but the interpretation of slavery at plantation sites in particular is far from meaningful, truthful or successful. The experience of slavery is either completely ignored or brushed over, and the violence faced by enslaved men, women and children is barely addressed. Tours were often empty of context and unsurprisingly silent on the brutality and sexual violence against black women. This book places a visit like mine into context: it explains some of the reasons why African-American history has not been interpreted and seeks to explore and help others in the field discuss the legacy of black Americans and how it can be distributed to a wider audience.

In his introduction, Max A. Van Balgooy explains the main problems and anxieties historical interpreters face, and the difficulties of navigating a past that still very much influences the present. Van Balgooy argues that African American history should not be separated; indeed it is 'not their history but *our* history' (p. xiii). Interpretation should be an inclusive history and tell the full story. Since people are more likely to trust museum exhibitions than academics, historical sites face a great pressure to not only tell stories accurately, but fairly. A reinterpretation of historical sites has taken place since the development of social history in the 1960s, but this progress has been slow and in some areas, non-existent.

The book is split into three sections: the first focuses on the current challenges in the interpretation of African-American history. Amanda Seymour's chapter on the interpretation of slavery at the homes of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James Munroe is a fascinating opening that deconstructs difficult conversations at some of the most popular destinations in the United States. Often, there is a 'skewed version of history' that concentrates on 'downplaying the brutality and moral, social and legal entanglements of the institution of slavery' (p. 5). Visitors are left with a 'rose-tinted' impression of the Founding Fathers that contributes to a 'false nostalgia' for the past (p. 5). Seymour highlights several trends across these historic sites: either the lives of the enslaved are trivialized or they are ignored completely, and occasionally costumed interpreters even propagate the myth that enslaved men and women were happy or better off in slavery.

Kristin L. Gallas and James DeWolf Perry agree and in their chapter argue for a comprehensive and consciousness of slavery at historic sites. Public education should be paramount, and the chapter includes a helpful guide to illustrate successful interpretation. Gallas and Perry argue for six components for the interpretation of historic sites. One, for example, highlights the need to have 'comprehensive content', which focuses on a regional and national study of slavery, placing it in context with the historical site in question as well as highlighting individual stories. Other components include 'community involvement' and the need for all staff to be trained appropriately and made aware of the opportunities and potential problems in interpreting the history of slavery (pp. 18–22). Gallas and Perry stress that it is important to know or estimate the level of knowledge a visitor has about slavery, as this often affects the quality and learning experience of the visit.

In her chapter on 'Interpreting difficult knowledge', Julia Rose believes the strongest method of interpretation lies with the ability to establish empathy, and warns interpreters that visitors may not know anything about slavery, have false information or might refuse to engage with the personal history of the enslaved. Regardless, the universal history of slavery must be told – the violence, suppression, resistance and rebellions – in order to understand the history of a particular site and the nation's history more generally. These interesting discussions force the reader to consider the challenges historical interpreters face on a daily basis, and how their work behind the scenes influences the particular stories they tell and how they deal with conflicting histories.

The second section focuses on research, and how public historians are fighting against the out-dated belief that African-American history cannot be interpreted if there is no information or lack of physical evidence. For example, Martha B. Katz-Hyman's powerful chapter explains the difficulty of resurrecting the lives of the forgotten enslaved men and women at historical sites. In most plantations and historic houses, guided tours focus on the furniture rather than the enslaved, partly because – so the argument goes – there is little material or physical evidence left of slave quarters or the enslaved themselves. Mentioning slave quarters on a map or a plaque is not enough to explain the history of slavery or recreate a life behind the statistic of how many enslaved people worked there. If there is little evidence, argues Katz-Hyman, then interpreters can 'use the space as a foundation to tell the stories of who lived there' (p. 105). Archaeological records, oral histories and archival records can piece together the story of a site, although recreating slave quarters can be mired by difficulties of terminology, for example, what they would have looked like and how they were used. Indeed, 'historians need to struggle with [these] questions, tell their stories and explain paradoxes' (p. 113).

The final section contains several case studies focusing on exhibitions and public history projects that are designed to 'inspire ideas and provoke discussion' (p. xvi). Wendi Manuel-Scott and Sara Howard-O'Brien grapple with the difficulties of reinventing the Frederick Douglass Elementary School in Virginia on a site scarred with the legacy of segregation. Educators have since involved the local community, learned of their struggles, and installed a permanent exhibition within the school to explain the difficulties faced before, during and after the Civil Rights Movement.

Robert Connolly and Ana Maria Rea discuss in depth the involvement of the local African-American community at the C. H. Nash Museum at Chucalissa, Mississippi, and argue that the best form of interpretation involves a strong connection to the local community. The outreach programme forged strong connections and became a 'true stakeholder' within the community: local schools helped create a permanent exhibit on the African American cultural heritage of Memphis, and the museum became a space to house Black History Month events and honour black veterans.

Finally, Ella Spears and Sheila Washington discuss the fascinating story of how efforts to interpret the history of the Scottsboro Boys in Alabama eventually led to full pardons being issued to the three defendants who still have on-going convictions. This is an inspiring conclusion to the book and provides more reasons why people within the heritage profession should work closely together and with the public to enforce change and present an accurate account of the past.

This volume offers a rich and interesting insight into the world of public history, but I would have liked to see a more comprehensive study or section on visitor response. Whilst I recognise the difficulties of gauging visitor satisfaction, it would be invaluable to consider community reaction to museum outreach programmes, and to hear the thoughts of visitors on how slavery or Civil Rights is interpreted at historic sites. The volume speaks to a greater collaboration between historians, educators, teachers and the public at large, so to give a voice to the visitors even in a small way would have enhanced the book.

Despite this, this volume provides an engaging and fascinating account of how African-American history is interpreted today. Historical interpreters have an opportunity to explore, ask questions, dig deeper and engage an audience whilst navigating the tensions of American history. This volume celebrates contributions and successes, but we need to recognise that many historic sites have much to improve when confronting the legacy of slavery.

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