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## **Reflections on Evoking History: Listening Across Cultures and Communities**

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This intense weekend was an extraordinarily rich experience. I had many thoughts, thanks not only to the sites themselves, our eloquent guides, and the materials we received, but also from informal conversations with our insightful group. I would like to share them with you while the experience is still fresh.

### *Displacing the present*

One of the thorniest issues to arise over the last few days is the relationship between Charleston's past and its present. Every intervention into Charleston's past is also an intervention into the present. The past is everywhere and how it is produced at once displaces and produces the present. A prime mover is preservation/restoration (coupled with tourism), as an engine of gentrification. Gentrification inevitably destroys living environments of memory by displacing those who live there. Charleston's African Americans, both those who sell their homes to benefit from rising property values and those who can no longer afford to live in improved neighborhoods, are especially vulnerable to displacement. Gentrification linked to tourism produces distinctive lifespaces. With about 70,000 people living on the peninsula and some 3,500,000 tourists a year, the ratio of visitors to locals (many of the locals are themselves new to the city) is already 50:1. Tourists fill the spaces they visit.

### *Heritage as Lifespace*

There were several experiences--the Market, the Schooner Pride, I'On--where the tension between heritage space and lifespace expressed itself with special clarity. First, the Meeting/Market/King Street area has become a tourist zone, displacing not only whatever lifespace might have preceded it, but also any heritage environment it might have been capable of sustaining. Or, rather, it has become the lifespace, defined by the presence of tourists and indicative of the shifting demographics and living patterns of Charleston. The city has become a mecca for retirees who move permanently to Charleston or use their Charleston home for part of the year. They (and others) are candidates for the newly minted "heritage" environment of I'On. Heritage, in essence, has become a place to live. This is a prime site for artistic intervention.

Second, and somewhat ironically, while a protest was taking place at the docks over the Charleston Five (the longshoremen at the center of a labor and civil rights battle), we were on board the Schooner Pride discussing Charleston's maritime heritage. The city's

proposal to convert Charleston's working port into waterfront redevelopment for tourism and move the container industry to a location outside the city came up. One of our "elders of the sea" stressed the importance of keeping the working dock in Charleston. While very much of the present and one of the few vital economic zones besides tourism, this industry is part of Charleston's long history as a major port.

Our discussion revolved around the following questions. Would the touristic development of the waterfront really generate more profit than the commercial port and is that reason enough to move the container business out of the city? What then would happen to the port? It could simply disappear into Charleston's long present. Or, it might become more profitable as heritage than it was as a functioning economy. The representation could displace the docks while they are alive (by moving them out of Charleston) or it might have to wait for them to die. Judging by the labor and civil rights protest going on during our discussions, one thing is clear. It is easier to control a representation of the port than to control the port as a living economy. Indeed, the port seems to be too vital to evoke the melancholy, the longing, or the nostalgia that are prerequisites for a heritage intervention. Rarely is heritage value conferred on a viable economy.

Nonetheless, there is much on the docks that lends itself to historic interpretation and artistic intervention. Allen Sekula's *Fish Story* comes to mind as one approach: "The thematic impulse behind *Fish Story* was to examine the contemporary maritime world, a world with an undeserved reputation for anachronism. How to counter the fantasy, common among elites, that information is the crucial commodity, and the computer the sole engine of our progress? The sea may be a forgotten space, but it is not an irrelevant space, nor is it simply "in-between" space of global capitalism. The maritime world is fundamental to late modernity, because it is the cargo container, an American innovation of the 1950s that makes the global system of manufacture possible."<sup>1</sup> The problem for Charleston's heritage brand is precisely this. First, the dock is a vital economy (it would have to be dying for to qualify for reinstatement as heritage). Second, the dock is not consistent with Charleston's heritage brand (that should make it an excellent candidate for artistic intervention). Third, the dock is even less compatible with the city's mandate to "reclaim Charleston as a wonderful place to live."

If keeping the docks in Charleston requires a persuasive economic argument, what then might it be? Some noted the importance of a diversified economy, as Charleston depends increasingly on tourism and tourism alone. How might artists help dockworkers make their case to the city? One approach would be to target the invisibility of city planning, which projects panoramically and years in advance. As Peter Stein noted in informal conversation, what might be the lasting impacts of such artists' projects and how might such impacts be evaluated?

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<sup>1</sup>Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1995).

### *Milieux de Mémoire/Lieux des Mémoire*

Pierre Nora distinguishes living environments of memory from official sites of memory.<sup>2</sup> *Milieux de mémoire* are "real environments of memory." In such environments, memory is part and parcel of everyday life, where it is embodied, narrated, and transmitted in the course of daily existence through "the warmth of tradition, in the silence of custom, in the repetition of the ancestral." Embodied memory is what we were privileged to witness when we visited the legendary Phillip Simmons.<sup>3</sup> *Lieux de mémoire* are sites of memory in the form of monuments, memorials, archives, libraries, and museums. Memory has been consigned or delegated to them. They are instruments (and instrumentalizations) of memory.

Gentrification destroys *milieux de mémoire* and heritage replaces them with *lieux de mémoire*, a process addressed in "What is the future of our neighborhood?" and "Rehearsing the Past: New Monuments for Charleston." How might memorials/monuments address the tension between memory and history? An exemplary project for thinking about this issue is Sigrid Sigurdsson's "In Face of The Silence" ([http://www.keom.de/kuenstlertexte/texte\\_englisch/sigurde.htm](http://www.keom.de/kuenstlertexte/texte_englisch/sigurde.htm)), a permanent installation and ongoing collaboration at the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum in Hagen, Germany. And, the "theatre archeology" of Michael Shanks and Michael Pearson, who work with Brith Gof (<http://www.theatre-wales.co.uk/a-z/brithgof.htm>) in Wales on site specific performances in landscapes that have buried history. They have performed memory at the sites of villages buried under reforestation projects that first hide and, twenty-five years later, after the trees are harvested, reveal history.<sup>4</sup> Both projects exemplify the workings of collective memory, a signal feature of *Secret Histories* and the audience's responses to the five interwoven narratives.<sup>5</sup>

### *The long present*

The Civil War brought an end to a way of life predicated on slave labor and came to serve as a kind of threshold for what the heritage industry constructs as "outside history." That which is outside history becomes part of the long present. If the end of the plantation economy signaled the end of Charleston's Golden Age, the "heritage" of that period is at the center of the city's recent revival and its "Palm Springs economy" (or was it Palm Beach?) The 140 years between the Civil War and today is a long present, either outside or not yet history or, at the very least, not yet heritage. How might artists' projects address the long present? What does the long present mean both to those who lost the Civil War and to those who gained their freedom?

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," *Representations*, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory. (Spring, 1989):7-24.

<sup>3</sup> See John Vlach, *Charleston Blacksmith: The Work of Philip Simmons* (University of Georgia Press, Athens, Ga. 1992).

<sup>4</sup> See Michael Pearson et al, "Theater Archeology," *TDR The Journal of Performance Studies* 38, 4 (T144) (Winter 1994): 133-161.

<sup>5</sup> See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, edited by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

### *Heritage apartheid*

The African American presence in Charleston, a focus of *Evoking History*, faces particular challenges in the heritage brand that has become Charleston. While slavery is the bedrock of antebellum Charleston, the history of slavery--and above all the terror of slavery--are all but invisible. Within Charleston's heritage brand, such sites fall into the category of what Dean MacCannell has dubbed negative sightseeing.<sup>6</sup> A former slave market has become a parking lot, without so much as a marker indicating what was once there. The glories of antebellum architecture, often without surviving slave quarters, are preserved, commemorated, and celebrated as monuments to Charleston's antebellum golden age and self-sufficient agrarian economy with little if any reference to the slave labor that produced and sustained them.

Where does this place the efforts to evoke silent, invisible, secret, or otherwise unmarked histories? Will there be an apartheid of histories--one white and the other black, each on its own track, each with its own monuments, separate and (un)equal? Ed Ball's tour (and his books) are extraordinarily important and moving. Courageously starting with his own family, he confronts the entangled history of white and black. Andrew Pekarik's question--When does your history become my history?--goes to the heart of the matter.

### *Jewel in the Crime*

During our visit to Fort Moultrie, a National Park Service site, Michael Allen captured perfectly the dilemma of reinterpreting icons of Charleston's heritage brand with his memorable slip of the tongue, "jewel in the crime." Just before we began our tour of one such jewel, Drayton Hall, Karen Nickless defined the interpretive challenge of such sites as treading the delicate line between Drayton Hall as a jewel of antebellum plantation architecture and landscape and Drayton Hall as a site of terror. Our tour guide, who was informative and interesting, brought us nowhere near that line. Consistent with what the brochure promised, we experienced the triumph of heritage over history: Drayton Hall's "mere existence proves its strength against the test of time and change, disuse and nature." This site was narrated from the perspective of those who understood themselves as the agents of history before the Civil War and the agents of heritage thereafter.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the Aiken-Rhett house did walk the line between splendor and terror--and did even more, in its own poetic way, thanks to the preservation of the slave quarters and evocative installations of Lonnie Graham.

Whose responsibility is it to address the secrets of history? The aggrieved alone? While it is courageous and honorable to seek redress, it is quite another matter to atone for what have come to be understood as crimes--even if one did not commit them oneself, but descends (or does not descend) from those who did. This is the challenge that faces Germans today in relation to the Holocaust and South African whites in relation to

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<sup>6</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Schocken, 1976; 2nd edition 1989).

<sup>7</sup> I discuss the idea of heritage as a mode of cultural production in "Destination Museum," in *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

Apartheid. Kendra Hamilton eloquently characterized the situation as one where "the war was won, but the peace was lost." How might artists' projects address the lost peace, given the cultural value placed upon politeness, indirection, and the avoidance of confrontation? How might such projects work against an apartheid of tourism, with an itinerary of grand homes and gardens for the white market and sites of slavery, documenting both the terror and the heroism of the African American experience, for the black market?

### *Limits of representation/Critical Reflection*

"Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past," in the words of Pierre Nora. To represent is both to say or image forth and to include (as in a representational democracy). The challenge, as we discussed, is to conceive of projects, among them memorials and monuments, so that they not only represent, but also do. In other words, to shift from the work as thing to the work as event, from "performances" to "performatives"--in a word, to works that set a chain of events in motion. Citing Nora again, "At the heart of history is a critical discourse that is antithetical to spontaneous memory." Art, like historiography, is a critical practice and can operate by "running a knife between the tree of memory and the bark of history." What are the limits of critical reflection in recuperations of desecrated memory and revelations of secret histories?

Contestations over Charleston's historical narrative, heritage landscape, tourism economy, and lifespace provoke critical reflection, as we were fortunate enough to experience throughout our roving seminar. As several people noted, however, we were a privileged group. How many visitors, not to mention locals, have such experiences? As Andrew Pekarik asked in informal conversation, are we underestimating our audiences? Given the emphasis of the Spoleto Festival on performance and ticketed events--the Piccolo component notwithstanding--anything else is a harder sell, even if it is free of charge. Judging from conversations with several locals and visitors, they came to Spoleto for the big ticket events, were less oriented to and less prepared for the visual arts, did not understand what the *Evoking History* projects were about, and did not build them into their total Spoleto experience.

### *From informative to performative heritage*

Contemporary art practice, which takes as its hallmark critical reflection, is an ideal medium for shifting normative heritage productions from the informative to the performative. That is, by reflecting critically not only on historical narratives, but also on the modalities through which they are instantiated, contemporary art practice can make the modalities "perform" themselves, thereby revealing not only how they "inform" but also they produce their authority. If authenticity is really about authentication, then a performative (and not only informative) approach to heritage is a signal contribution that contemporary art projects could make.

This is particularly important in the context of tourism, which might be thought of as a museum of the consciousness industry, a place where old ideas find their final resting place. How else to account for the absence of any mention of slavery in the brochure for

Middleton Place, "America's oldest landscaped gardens, celebrating 250 years?" Here, as in brochures for related sites, the Confederacy lost the Civil War, but could be said to have won the heritage war: "Middleton Place...has survived revolution, civil war, and earthquake. The plantation economy is characterized as follows: "The blacksmith, potter, carpenter, and weaver recreate the activities of a self-sustaining Low Country plantation. Agricultural displays, together with horses and mules, hogs and milking cows, sheep, goats, and guinea hens, bring to life the rice and cotton eras." The same is true of such anodyne statements as: "Come visit Boone Hall Plantation and listen carefully; you may hear soft whispers of the bygone era of quiet elegance and gracious living of the Old South." There is no mention of slavery.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, slavery becomes a kind of limit case for what this type of heritage modality ("bring to life") can and cannot do. What would be required to "recreate" and "bring to life" slavery, a defining feature of the plantation, assuming, that is, that anyone would want to do this?

Rather, these brochures exemplify the art of indirection. Such statements as "The art of sweet grass baskets continues at Boone Hall Plantation. This authentic African craft produced many useful utensils once essential to daily plantation life" makes no reference to African Americans or to slaves. It treats the "art" and "craft" of sweet grass baskets as an autonomous process. Agency resides in the art not in the artist, a photograph showing a pair of black hands weaving a basket notwithstanding.

#### *Relational autobiography*

Two authors whose work bears on the issues we have been considering are Paul Gilroy, whose *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), speaks directly to the Middle Passage, next year's theme, particularly in the chapter "'Not a Story to Pass On': Living Memory and the Slave Sublime." The Old South is figured, through slavery, as the site of modernity--in the words of Toni Morrison, "modern life begins with slavery"--while Gilroy urges that we "rethink the concept of tradition so that it can no longer function as modernity's polar opposite."

What Gilroy calls "the sites of ineffable terror" are the subject of Saidiya V. Hartman's brilliant book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997). Hartman offers a suggestive basis for reinterpreting historic sites and conceptualizing artists' projects by setting out to "illuminate the terror of the mundane and the quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle," by examining "the diffusion of terror and the violence perpetrated under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism, and property." This is her strategy for exploring how "the enactment of subjugation" figures in "the constitution of the subject," both black and white.

How do autobiographical narratives illuminate the enactment of subjugation and its role in constituting the subject through what Paul Eakins calls relational autobiography. All autobiography is relational because a sense of self always emerges in relation to others,

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<sup>8</sup> Note that the statement "The art of sweet grass baskets continues at Boone Hall Plantation. This authentic African craft produced many useful utensils once essential to daily plantation life" makes no reference to African Americans or to slaves, but treats the "art" and "craft" of sweet grass baskets as an autonomous process. There is a photograph showing a pair of black hands weaving a basket.

as does the narration of that self.<sup>9</sup> We saw this idea in action during Ed Ball's account of his own family and in the five autobiographical strands that were woven together in *Secret Histories*. For those of us not from South Carolina, it was especially important to see *Secret Histories* with people who shared the experiences narrated from the stage.

Both events raised important questions about the nature and efficacy of artistic mediation in self-narration. How do narratives of the self, through repetition, develop a canonical form and kind of completeness, even for the narrator? Revealing histories that have hitherto been kept secret is itself a major achievement. But, is it possible to disagree--to reflect critically--on personal truth and the language in which it is expressed? Michael Brenson, in informal conversation, encouraged us to examine our vocabulary and in particular the term "community." Many other terms that we have come to take for granted could be added to the list, including "identity" and "heritage."

### *Structures of Feeling*

Some of us were struck by the sensibility (what Raymond Williams would call "structures of feeling") in the performances of self at the center of *Secret Histories*. Indeed, it could be said that one of the great challenges facing *Evoking History* projects is the role of shame in dealing with history and heritage, particularly when for so long it has been possible to keep secrets and deny terror. I am struck by the responses, both expected and unanticipated, of *Crimes of the Wehrmacht* in Germany and Vienna. Both are spaces purged of Jews but still inhabited by those responsible for the genocide or by their descendents and they differ in the degree to which they hold themselves accountable.<sup>10</sup>

As Andrew Pekarik commented so artfully in informal conversation, "Charleston is saturated with pain. It is a human geiger counter to suffering. What is my responsibility to that now? The tourist stuff is an exorcist movement that lets us cleanse ourselves by going shopping. How might the economy of tourism heal the wounds of Charleston? What would it take to make Charleston a destination for African American tourists?"

### *Limits and possibilities of art*

Daniel Martinez opened our final discussion by calling for art to be left to do what it is good at. It cannot be all things to all people. It can not do everything. One person, during our Saturday discussion, dared ask "Do we even need an artist?" At several points--particularly in front of Denmark Vesey's home, which was part of the Tour of Slave Sites--we began to explore different approaches to monuments. Someone noted that monuments, which are generally crystallizations, could serve as a call to action, as beacons rather than tombstones. In an informal conversation, Michael Mercil noted that monuments are about adhesion. They attract stories and stories have a way of sticking to them. What about the aesthetics of monuments? Should they look like other monuments in Charleston so as to enter the official heritage landscape of the city? Or, should they

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<sup>9</sup> Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> See [http://www.his-online.de/press/war\\_e.htm](http://www.his-online.de/press/war_e.htm), which describes the exhibition (it was accompanied by a catalogue that has been translated into English). See also *East of War*, a documentary shot in the exhibition itself when it was in Vienna, by experimental filmmaker Ruth Beckermann (1997).

challenge the entire genre? Are any monuments created within the historical genre doomed to be "bad art"? How might a more experimental approach produce an effective and affecting monument, while departing from the expectations of what a monument should look like?

From *Places with a Past* to *Evoking History*, a ten-year trajectory, Mary Jane Jacobs has succeeded in raising the bar for what public art can be and do when it attends closely to local situations and issues of burning concern to those who live there, encourages wide-ranging conversations and collaborations, supports an extended process, takes risks, and makes critical reflection a priority.