

Name by Name, Face by Face: Elevating Historical Representations of American Slave Life

by Julia Rose

As educators who teach about historical moments of persecution and suffering it is imperative to address why and how we engage learners in testimony and representations of oppression (Eppert, 2002).

Introduction: Slave Life Representations Coming Into Focus on the American Historical Landscape

The history of American slavery is slowly, and with great emotion, coming into focus after generations of museum workers and academic scholars have scripted histories to commemorate the lives of slaveholders while marginalizing the lives of enslaved communities. While our lenses are clearing, our vision of whose histories we represent in our museums and at our historical sites continues to be fogged by long-held interpretive traditions recalling a white privileged American story.

Slave life histories can be difficult to interpret due to the traumatic events they recall and the racially charged rhetoric implicit in our collective memory of American slavery. Increasingly, museums are adding references to enslaved populations to their interpretations, and museum curators and administrators recognize resistances from colleagues and volunteers to these efforts. Today, thousands of museum workers (both paid and volunteer) at hundreds of sites are engaged in interpreting the oppressive history of American slavery. What happens when museum workers grapple with the tough stories that slave life presents? What are the components of a pedagogical strategy to engage museum workers in developing responsible and sensitive interpretations about slavery?

Elevating Historical Interpretations of Enslaved Communities at Historical Sites and Museums: A Hesitant Pace

A confluence of significant events has paved the way to enable museums to work on elevating and expanding the historical representations of American slave life. The rise of social history over the course of the 20th century provided the groundwork for the interpretive transition. The ascent of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s helped the African American presence to be felt in the nation's museum community (Blight, 2001 and Kammen, 1991). And many museums focusing solely on European American accomplishments (see Conn, 1998, and Willinsky, 1998) have been restructuring their historical interpretations to reflect the nation's racial diversity.

Good work is being done in museums and at historical plantation sites. In South Louisiana, some 28 sites have added slave life history to their historical landscapes since 1990. While slave life history is slowly being added to the historical plantation landscape, the interpretations are most often laced with observable resistances and feelings of risk and fear.

I have found that museum workers, professional and volunteer, white, black and of diverse backgrounds, are grappling with deep feelings of risk and discomfort in sifting through racially charged rhetoric, and express fear of confrontations with other museum workers and the public. Museums are often stymied by the prospect of developing interpretations of slave life (Rose, 2006). What are the obstacles that feed our sensibilities in representing slave life?

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Two slave cabins from Rosedale Plantation are furnished to interpret enslaved family life in the antebellum period. Oakley Plantation, Audubon State Historic Site in St. Francisville, LA. All photos courtesy of Julia Rose.



The furnishings of this slave cabin reflect the few possessions of a named mother, father and their children including period examples of clothing, cooking implements, medicinal materials, bedding, field work tools, cotton cards, and toys.

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The slow transition to expand the representations of slave life has been well documented in the literature (e.g. Eichstedt and Small 2002; Shackel 2003; Horton and Horton, 2006). How do we honor the memory of lives long uncelebrated or marginalized? What constitutes an ethical response from us in the present? I refer to this kind of interpretation as *commemorative interpretation*. We can begin the process of developing commemorative interpretations by asking ourselves and our visitors to deeply consider the question, "Who lived here"? We are focused on finding the site-specific stories that work to describe historical characters as persons with unique stories, affections and connections to the world.

Commemorating Personhood, Historical Empathy, and Difficult Knowledge

Commemorating the past suggests that we remember historical populations as real persons by utilizing stories about relationships that explain the complexities of people's lives; their relationships to others, to their communities and to society (Rose, 2007). In order to commemorate historical individuals and to fully recognize their identities, museum workers need stories that include multiple dimensions, allowing us to recognize the humanity affected by plantation slavery.

For instance, representations of the historical enslaved plantation residents need to address how slavery forced mothers to parent without the liberty to act fully, with little control over their children's labor or day care, and how slavery necessitated persistent negotiations between the enslaved community and the planter family. Understanding history as lived experiences is "scarcely possible without some sense of shared human nature" (Jordanova, 2000). Demarcating the presence of slaves fully with genealogies and lived experiences offers insights into human integrity that is otherwise diminished by one dimensional representations, such as a name, job title, or by merely using the term "slave" (Rose, 2005).

I will share an example of a multidimensional description that approaches a commemorative interpretation. The family described below was a part of the enslaved community at Magnolia Mound Plantation in Baton Rouge, Louisiana through the 1790s. This brief history is part of a larger genealogical study I conducted in 2001-2006 on the enslaved families at that plantation (Rose, 2006). Magnolia Mound Plantation, an historical site in downtown Baton Rouge, is considering ways to incorporate the genealogies of the 18th century enslaved community into their site interpretation.

A Cameo: *American Will* may have felt desperation for the welfare of his young family when the slave community he lived in for eight years was torn apart by the legal division of property decided by his master's attorney. *American Will* watched as his wife Minta and five children were separated from him and forced to leave Magnolia Mound Plantation to live and labor at a cotton plantation fifty miles north of Baton Rouge. He ran away. But did he run away or run to his family? He was a skilled carpenter who had helped others run away from their sites of bondage. He traveled north as a runaway to St. Johns Plains, Louisiana, an area where he was closer to his wife and children, living like a fugitive for four years. He was captured and offered for sale by his owners, Armand and Constance Duplantier, who no longer wanted the liability of a runaway slave at their cotton plantation. The Duplantiers sold *American Will* to his captor, a planter in Galvezton several miles south of Baton Rouge, and even farther from his family (Rose, 2006).

After reading about *American Will* and his family, I as a learner want to know more. Did he make any more attempts to reunite with Minta and his children? What happened? Commemorative interpretations tell stories that prompt visitors' demands to know more. This response can be called *historical empathy*, which is a response that moves audiences from being passive learners to becoming active learners—they care about the history and want to know more.

However, slave life histories can prompt intellectual and emotional resistances and unease from museum workers and visitors.



This slave cabin was originally from a sugar plantation in Pointe Coupee Parish. Illustrating a household, the setting moves ever closer towards commemorative interpretations. Magnolia Mound Plantation in Baton Rouge, LA.

Museum workers use the expression “tough stories” to describe slave life histories. Stories about oppression can be considered difficult knowledge. Difficult knowledge (e.g., histories of mass violence, enslavement, and oppression), a concept developed by education theorist, Deborah Britzman, (1998), describes disturbing or painful histories that are hard for learners to take in all at once.

Herein lies the challenge that museum workers face when required to learn and interpret oppressive, frightening, imposing, and at times, threatening historical information. How do we learn histories that might run counter to our moral understandings of the world? How do we engage museum workers in histories they resist interpreting?

Working through Difficult Knowledge: Commemorative Museum Pedagogy

As a museum educator, I use learning theories to help unravel some of the obstacles to expanding slave life interpretations at historical sites and museums. Key to this method is the mindset that museum workers are learners. Based on learning theories from Anna Freud (e.g. see Britzman, 1998, and Morris, 2001), learning is essentially interference disrupting the learner's current understandings. New knowledge interferes with the learner's internal status quo, as the learner is always working towards balance

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—his or her way of making sense of the world. Resistance can stem from feelings of dissonance when the new knowledge jeopardizes what one knows. Personal internal pain or sadness in receiving the newly introduced histories can conflict with the museum worker's present understandings of history. Perhaps, here is an important clue to understanding the observable resistance or hesitation to developing expanded historical African American representations.



Interiors in historic cabins from Allendale Plantation, a sugar plantation, provide settings for interpreting plantation life from the slavery era through to the Civil Rights Movement. West Baton Rouge Museum in Port Allen, LA.

Commemorative Museum Pedagogy (CMP) (Rose, 2006) is a learning strategy I developed for museum workers positioned as learners who are charged with expanding and elevating the historical interpretations of slave life. CMP is a gradual and sensitive approach that enables learners to work through the challenges of newly introduced slavery histories, which can affect the traditional meanings and representations at sites and museums.

To enable museum workers-as-learners to work through difficult knowledge, I suggest there are five unfolding phases we can recognize: **reception, resistance, repetition, reflection, and reconsideration.** The five phases, which I call the 5Rs, unfold in unpredictable sequences over varying lengths of time, depending on each learner's personal connections and responses to the difficult knowledge. Museum workers' awareness of these five phases, and awareness of how individuals progress through them in different orders and at different rates, will allow for the more sensitive and gradual learning experiences necessary for working through personal resistances and to encourage historical empathy to emerge.

The 5Rs come from my ethnographic work with one particular group of museum workers, volunteer and paid, whose ages ranged from twenties to sixties, and who were charged with learning and interpreting newly introduced slave life histories for their historical plantation (Rose, 2006). I embarked on an eight-month study at a well established AAM-accredited historical plantation in south Louisiana. The study did not include visitors to the museum. I focused on museum workers, especially those charged with site interpretation and tours, as the key agents for expanding slave life representations in museums.

In the first phase of the study, I observed each museum worker give tours, which were followed by one-on-one post-tour conversations. In the second phase, I distributed a history report documenting the multidimensional history of the enslaved community from that historical plantation, historical information that had never been previously available. Third, we held focus group meetings to discuss the

history report and how the new information could be used to expand the current tour. In the fourth phase, the museum workers endeavored as a group to revise the current tour narrative using the history report. In the final phase, each museum worker was asked to give a pilot tour based on the revised tour narrative. The 5Rs, which form the backbone of CMP, were formulated based on the results of this study.

Reception: *Name those [enslaved] carpenters. Don't go into their family. It is too much.*

I found that the museum workers were enthusiastic about learning new slave life histories to make their tour narratives “more real” and to “put flesh on the bone.” However, the museum workers were often loyal to the traditional tour narrative and tended to express interest in slave life stories that supported their personal attachments to French Creole heritage and to the historical planter family long associated with the site. In receiving the new slave life histories, the museum workers were eager for generic stories and one-dimensional descriptions, especially the names and jobs of enslaved individuals. They were less interested in learning multidimensional representations, the more complex genealogies and relationships of the historical enslaved individuals and families. It appeared that one-dimensional representations of slave life were much less disruptive to the museum workers’ understandings of the site’s historical meanings.

Resistance: *I would like substantial information to back that up if on the tour we are to talk about the depersonalization of slaves and how they were given away as wedding gifts or used to pay debts, that whole idea that they were not human.*

The new information disrupted most of the museum workers’ current understandings, triggering denials, skepticism, silences, and refusals. Museum workers waffled between enthusiasm and resistance to the slave life histories. Their resistances were not to the anonymous histories. Rather, their resistances stemmed more from learning and then retelling the personal, fully human stories that went beyond one dimension, the flat description of the word “slave” or merely a name—American Will. Resistances more often arose when the museum workers were learning about historical people in multiple dimensions. Museum workers expressed feelings of risk or apprehension. They expressed concerns that the site-specific slave life histories could offend visitors; they expressed feelings of loss for a 30-year tour tradition; they expressed skepticism about the historical accuracy of the slave life history under consideration. However, when the museum workers resisted new information, it became apparent that the learning moments emerged.

Repetition: *I need to read that again.*

Repetition was a natural response to newly introduced slave life histories that seemed to interfere with the museum workers’ understandings of their historical site. The museum workers repeated parts of the history that they found difficult to learn or tour narratives they could not bear to see changed. The process of repeating a painful event symbolically allowed them to reconsider the difficult knowledge. They repeated a story over again, or asked the same questions, or read a text multiple times. For example, one museum worker labored through a focus group meeting repeating “Joan died? She died? Joan

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- died?" As the museum-workers-as-learners worked through the new information by way of repetition, each new piece of knowledge was fit into their personal way of understanding the history of that site. The museum workers did not necessarily refuse the knowledge that they resisted. I found that most of them were eager for opportunities to repeat and reflect on the possibility of expanding the tour narrative.
- Reflection:** *This is an important story.*
- The museum workers spoke freely with each other during our group meetings and among themselves outside of the formal meetings. These discussions offered them opportunities to reflect on the history they were asked to learn and interpret. Dialogue played an important part in learning. The reflective conversations encouraged the museum workers to ask what sense they could make of the new information and what spoke to them and what did not. They gradually took on responsibility toward the newly introduced slave life history, expressing that they cared what happened to the historical population and that their stories must be told. In these reflective moments they developed historical empathy. They were moving beyond their immediate identification with the plantation history in order to bring justice to those whose lives they were now imagining.
- Reconsideration:** *It is where the information can fit in...The link of the use of a room, to say a house slave [was] part of the household, it is more interesting to link everything like this; it makes more sense.*
- At the end of the eight month study, two of the five museum workers could not reconcile the new slave life histories with the current site interpretation and refused to engage further in the project. In a follow up visit, six months later, I found one of those two museum workers had pursued her own research and writing to include slave life histories, in what she described as "my own terms." The museum workers' reconsideration for the slave life histories for their tour narratives appeared in subtle yet meaningful ways. For example, they were willing to consider new one-dimensional representations, and to reconsider commemorative interpretations as they grew more familiar with the historical individuals. They were also able to identify artifacts and physical spaces in the historic big house where they could introduce slave life histories, and further develop their tour narratives from these starting points. Most of the museum workers were ready to acknowledge the oppressive realities slaveholding imposed on the integrated plantation community as necessary to the site interpretation.
- In Conclusion: Bit by Bit, Difficult Knowledge Emerges in Historical Interpretations**
- Commemorative Museum Pedagogy allows museum workers to work through difficult knowledge in a reflective learning mode, which affords museum workers time, support, and resources to learn difficult knowledge. CMP encourages museum workers to recognize that historical site interpretations are ongoing projects, which are never truly completed. New histories surface and contemporary emphasis



Pictured is a two-room cypress dwelling, interpreted as a plantation hospital from the antebellum period. The site's interpretation goes beyond domestic settings and includes work histories and community stories from the quarter. LSU Rural Life Museum in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

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changes, and priorities shift over time and in relation to social and academic movements. Attachments and loyalties to the iconic meanings of their historical sites contribute to the range of museum workers' resistances and enthusiasm for expanding representations of historical places and persons.

Museums that incorporate CMP into their interpretation development programs should allow for varying amounts of time needed for working through individual museum workers' resistances. They should provide opportunities for dialogue where repetition, reflection and reconsideration can emerge. Historical empathy will develop if museum workers are encouraged to move from learning one-dimensional representations towards multidimensional representations, ever approaching commemorative interpretations. While it is unreasonable to expect immediate revisions from an entire group, museum workers should

be encouraged to make sense of difficult knowledge bit-by-bit. To take in difficult knowledge all at once can be overwhelming, and will likely ensure foreclosure, a permanent shut down of the learning process.

As museum workers, we face the feelings of risk and take on the hard labor of working through difficult knowledge that slave life presents. We are deeply realizing for ourselves, bit by bit, who we are as a broad and diverse America. We are a part of a populace that is more ready than a generation ago to disrupt the status quo in rewriting our museum narratives to reflect our broad and diverse ancestry. A remarkable change is unfolding within our national community of museums. As we let go of long-held attachments and work through the painful stories of American slavery, we are revising and representing our diverse American identity more ethically and more effectively. ✨

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