

Abstract from the Eighth Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference
at Yale University

Slavery and Public History: An International Symposium

November 2-4, 2006
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

Competing Narratives of Memorialized History

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Available online at www.yale.edu/glc/publichistory/ebron.pdf

Senegambia and the Georgia Sea Islands inspire a contradiction: on the one hand, both sites attract a great deal of popular interest; on the other hand, their selection baffles many traditionally trained historians. Neither site is viewed by detractors as a representative place for these regions are thought of as minor sites of memory and history. Pre-colonial Senegambia, or more pointedly the popular tourist site, Maison des Esclaves, on Goree Island, Senegal, according to historian Phillip Curtin, did not send large numbers of Africans from its shores. Similarly, Americanists, find coastal South Carolina an odd site of commemoration for much historical work has been done to consign colonial Virginia as the *ur* site of African American presence in the New World. Yet, both locations have gained their prominence as sites within, yet most importantly beyond, official histories as popular revisionists and cultural producers have allowed other kinds of dreams to frame the significance of place in history. These trespassers on the terrain of professional historians develop what Raymond

Williams would refer to as a *structure of feeling*, where something of the past is invoked to frame the everyday experience of those who want to trace a connection to the historical African diaspora. Yet, rather than hold professional historians and organic intellectuals at a distance, I hope to reveal the productive exchange of ideas among groups that have influenced both the popular and academic projects.

My comments will be informed by a selection of excerpts about slavery taken from a representative group of people who narrate a history of slavery. These include historians, jalis (griots), cultural development organizations such as UNESCO, journalists and filmmakers. All of these figures are intimately connected to tourist development schemes through narratives of slavery. They animate different ways of telling the past. Hayden White's notion, "The past is a place of fantasy," (Damanska 1998:13) forms a critical nexus of agendas as they link to the itineraries of tourists to historical routes. Following my engagement with historical narratives, I will then turn to discuss two tours in order to develop the notion of presence as an analytic concept with a particular purchase. (Gumbrecht 2004). This idea can productively link the spatial and temporal dimensions of the historical experience to contemporary tourist aspirations. The effort to fill in time and space most productively sheds light on slavery's significance to contemporary postcolonial societies.

While I consider public history and narratives about slavery, I ground my comments as an anthropologist who has observed the rich play of agendas in two contexts in which I was allowed to participate. Both instances occurred

several years ago yet provide constructive ground to consider the ways slavery figures into tourist agendas. One of the trips was a McDonalds sponsored homeland tour that awarded several contest winners with a ten day trip to Senegal and The Gambia. A second event, referred to by organizers as a Learning Expedition, took undergraduate students to The Georgia Sea Islands for one week so that they might learn about the history of the people of the islands. Both places come together in my current research as I link the historical connections of the Atlantic world through the tropes of memory, landscape, and political uplift. My project traces the cultural artifacts of scholars and cultural producers as these groups create the distinctive and overlapping features of regions, i.e., the U.S. south and coastal West Africa.