

Living History

Living History:
Encountering the Memory
of the Heirs of Slavery

Edited by

Ana Lucia Araujo

Living History: Encountering the Memory of the Heirs of Slavery,
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INTRODUCTION

THE SLAVE PAST IN THE PRESENT

ANA LUCIA ARAUJO

Memory and history have long been associated, and very often become merged. If we think of memory as a kind of “souvenir” – a chronicle or a comment – its definition becomes very close to the notion of history as “the account of a succession of events.”¹ On a hierarchical scale, history corresponds to an official account, very often consensual and carrying truth, while memory belongs to the realm of imagination, fiction, construction, and very near to the idea of a lie. According to this perspective, memory is a synonym for tradition, and within its scope one finds all sort of items such as oral accounts, images, songs, and dance. When studying memory, historians often tried to separate what is true from what is false: to distinguish between the “truth,” which one finds in written documents and archives, and the “lie” found very often in oral testimonies. Memory is often seen as a kind of faulty oral archive, an imperfect representation of the past of which many scholars feel suspicious instead of trying to understand its mechanisms.

The emergence of memory as a mode of discourse is an important feature of our globalized and mediatized world.² Studied by Pierre Nora in *Lieux de mémoire*,³ this memorial wave, which some years ago could be observed mainly in Europe and North America, has now crested in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The resurgence of memory is not only part of an individual process but is also a collective activity embodied in public memorial projects as museums, monuments, and commemorative activities.

Scholars such as François Hartog have tried to explain the new emergence of memory by arguing that history is characterized by periods in which our relationship to time is questioned, creating regimes of historicity. The “presentist” regime of historicity is marked by events that become obsolete almost immediately. In other words, presentism is defined by the omnipresence of the present: on the one hand, simultaneity, real time, and numerical circulation; and on the other hand, an avalanche

of memories, commemorations, and recovered identities. In this new context, memory no longer functions simply as a way to transmit the past but rather as a way of making the present a place or a moment of rupture, a process that very often involves the search for an identity that has been denied, lost, or suppressed.⁴

With the recent emergence of the memory of slavery, presentification of the past allows those who are or who claim to be descendants of slaves to legitimize their demand for recognition and for reparations for past wrongs.⁵ Memory, heritage, and identity – here seen as the construction and projection of an image of the self and others – became closely associated. Charles S. Maier described this phenomenon as a “surfeit of memory,”⁶ usually characterizing a community “obsessively preoccupied with wrongs committed against itself ... [that] constructs its collective identity predominantly around the notion of victimization.”⁷ For him, the danger of this excess of memory is the development of a focus on narrow ethnicity, a form of communitarianism that can eventually hinder what he calls democracy.

Some reparation claims encompass financial compensation, but very often they express the need for memorialization through public commemoration, museums, and monuments. In some contexts, presentification of the slave past has helped governments and the descendants of former masters and slave merchants to formulate public apologies.⁸ For some, expressing repentance is not only a means to erase guilt but also a way to gain political prestige.⁹

Although the ways in which the memory of slavery has emerged carry similarities, the forms of expression are multiple. At both the private and the public levels, slavery is commemorated differently in the old metropolises (England, France, Netherlands, Germany, Spain, and Portugal) from in the Americas (the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, and South America, especially Brazil but also Suriname, Cuba, Curaçao, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, and Argentina). Examining the multiple memories constructed by individuals and groups asserting themselves as descendants of slaves implies that we must deal with mediators. Although these memories are marked by gaps, many actors in Africa, Europe, and the Americas have developed strategies to overcome these ruptures, recreating, reinventing, and transforming their past through art, religion, culture, and heritage. The memory produced by these forms of mediation constitutes what Marianne Hirsch defined as “postmemory:” “the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be

neither understood nor recreated.”¹⁰ In this context of mediated memory, the notion of heritage, material or immaterial, is unavoidable, as heritage is an inheritance that actively participates in the transmission of identity.¹¹ However, if heritage allows us to claim a particular identity in relation to a specific past, national borders no longer circumscribe these multiple legacies of slavery. The internet and cultural tourism now contribute to sharing, globalizing, and transnationalizing these experiences and the demands of these actors.

As a collective process, memory is a way “to express a community’s sense of responsibility for past wrongdoing and to create and preserve a record of it.”¹² Following World War II, the Shoah survivors became the quintessential example of victims who embodied the resurgence of memory: as witnesses of incarceration, forced labour, and genocide they were able to narrate the traumatic events they experienced. We can situate the first signs of the rise of the memory of the Atlantic slave trade in the same period. This resurgence accompanied the emergence of civil rights movement in the United States, the fight against apartheid in South Africa, and independence movements in Africa. At different levels, these three different struggles associated slave and colonial pasts with the deep racial and social inequalities then confronting populations of African descent. When Martin Luther King Jr asserted in his seminal “I Have a Dream” speech that “one hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination,”¹³ he was referring to the slave past, not as a witness to it but as one who had inherited its inequalities, as a social actor who gave voice to the descendants of the victims.

Cultural assertion movements of populations of African descent spread out in the Americas during the 1970s and 1980s, but it was during the 1990s that forms of commemoration and official projects to promote the memory of slavery became more visible in Europe and Africa. Debates that arose in response to the celebration of the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas led UNESCO to launch the Slave Route Project. Initiated in 1994, the project emerged from the need to discuss not only the impact of slavery and the slave trade on the development of Africa but also its repercussions for the status of people of African descent around the world. The Slave Route Project became a huge umbrella under which various cultural, educational, scientific, and tourism programmes were developed. In this period, some West African countries, such as the Republic of Benin, Ghana and Senegal, received international financial support to restore and conserve historical sites related to the Atlantic slave trade past. Sites such as the *Maison des esclaves* on Gorée

Island became the stage for apologies for slavery and the slave trade, offered by the Pope John Paul II. At this same site, US Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Luis Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil condemned the slavery past. In Europe, West Africa, and the Caribbean, other initiatives included the erection of monuments, the organization of commemorations and festivals, and the construction of private museums.

A new wave of commemorations related to the slave trade also arrived in South America. In 1985, Brazil witnessed the end of a twenty-year military dictatorship. In 1988, commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the abolition of slavery was marked by the development of several historical works focusing on neglected aspects of the Brazilian slave past. The new democratic period allowed the population of African descent in Brazil to demand redress of past wrongdoings through affirmative action and commemorative activities. In 1995, the Brazilian government established November 20th as the National Day of Black Consciousness. The date was chosen because it was the 300th anniversary of the death of Zumbi, the leader of Palmares, the most important Brazilian runaway slave community; it was the culmination of almost twenty years of effort by the *Movimento Negro Unificado* (Unified Black Movement).¹⁴

In the first decade of this century, commemorations have intensified in Europe. In 2001, France approved the Law Taubira of May 10th, 2001, declaring that slavery and the slave trade are crimes against the humanity. The year 2004 was declared the International Year for the Commemoration of the Struggle against Slavery and Its Abolition and the bicentenary of Haitian independence. In 2006, May 10th was established as a day of remembrance of slavery and its abolition in Metropolitan France. In 2008, the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the British slave trade was widely celebrated in both Europe and the Americas with conferences, publications, monuments, and the opening of the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool.

In this volume, the contributors try to establish a clear distinction between history and memory, here understood as two distinct modes of discourse. History is conceived of as an official, structured, and organized account of events that happened in the past and that must be understood in the light of the past. Hence, history studies the past in its own time: it studies the past as past. Memory, by contrast, essentially consists of updating the past in the present. From this point of view, studying memory involves dealing with current issues in order to understand how the past is reconstructed in our time. Memory is thus a property that allows us to bring to the present events that occurred in the past. It is always anachronistic; it is constructed in relation to the past, which is updated in

the present. In this process of presentification, the experience or the object of the past is brought to the present – is treated as present – while preserving its pastness.¹⁵ As Gabrielle Spiegel points out, memory is different from history: it “‘reincarnates,’ ‘ressurrects,’ ‘re-cycles,’ and makes the past ‘reappear’ and live again in the present, it cannot perform historically, since it refuses to keep the past in the past.”¹⁶ As many of the essays in this volume show, in societies such as contemporary Brazil, France, and the United States, memory and history keep a constant dialogue. If the writing of history allows the heirs of slavery to identify themselves with neglected actors of the past, their claims also transform the writing of history. Historians, art historians, sociologists, and anthropologists are now obliged not only to work on neglected aspects of slavery and slave trade but also to reconsider historical, economic, and demographical data in order to re-examine the social actors’ lived experience.

The preparation of this volume coincided with the long campaign that led Barack Obama to become the first African American president of the United States. Over the course of the campaign, Obama referred to his Kenyan grandfather as an heir of colonization: “My father grew up herding goats in Kenya. His father – my grandfather – was a cook, a domestic servant to the British.”¹⁷ The future president also reminded his audience of the slave ancestry of his wife, Michelle Obama, whose great-great-grandfather, born around 1850, was a slave on a rice plantation in South Carolina until the Civil War: “I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners.”¹⁸ The US presidential election of 2008 was far from a simple national issue. In Europe, Africa, and Latin America, the election of Barack Obama gave new hope to the populations of African descent usually excluded because of their cultural and racial background.

The essays constituting this book are based largely on papers presented at the workshop *Living History: Encountering the Heirs of Slavery*, held during the 122nd American Historical Association Meeting in Washington, DC, in January 2008. The task of selecting and gathering the essays in order to transform them into a book was not easy. Indeed, not all the papers from the workshop are included here, and the addition of few new contributions has helped to diversify approaches and geographical areas.

Over the last years, the study of memory has become a very popular academic trend, as can be seen in the titles of books, papers, and conferences. But few works have dealt with the memory of slavery in the sense in which this book does.¹⁹ These chapters focus on the several forms

of reconstructing the past in the present. The authors analyse different aspects of the recent phenomenon of memorializing slavery, especially the practices employed to stage the slave past in both public and private spaces. The essays present memory and oblivion as part of the same process; they discuss reconstructions of the past in the present at different public and private levels through historiography, photography, exhibitions, monuments, memorials, collective and individual discourses, cyberspace, religion and performance. By offering a comparative perspective on the United States and West Africa, as well as on Western Europe, South America, and the Caribbean, the chapters offer new possibilities to explore the resurgence of the memory of slavery as a transnational movement in our contemporary world.

Notes

¹ Jacques Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 180.

² Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations* 69, Special Issue: Grounds for Remembering (2000): 127-150.

³ Pierre Nora, "Entre Mémoire et histoire. La problématique des lieux," in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 23-43.

⁴ François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), 28.

⁵ Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Ana Lucia Araujo, "Mémoires et débats présents" in *Dictionnaire des esclavages*, ed. Olivier Petré-Grenouilleau (Paris: Larousse, 2009) forthcoming.

⁶ Charles S. Maier, "A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial," *History and Memory: Studies in Representation of the Past* 5 (1993): 136-152.

⁷ Jeffrey Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 16.

⁸ See the case of the family DeWolf in Thomas Norman DeWolf, *Inheriting the Trade: A Northern Family Confronts its Legacy as the Largest Slave-Trading Dynasty in US History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008). See also the documentary *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*, produced by Katrina Browne,

⁹ See Ana Lucia Araujo, "Renouer avec le passé brésilien: la reconstruction du patrimoine post-traumatique chez la famille De Souza au Bénin" in *Traumatisme collectif pour patrimoine: Regards croisés sur un mouvement transnational*, ed. Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Vincent Auzas (Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2008), 305-330.

¹⁰ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames, Photography Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22.

¹¹ Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "Patrimonialiser les mémoires pour accorder à la souffrance la reconnaissance qu'elle mérite" in *Traumatisme collectif pour*

patrimoine: Regards croisés sur un mouvement transnational, ed. Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Vincent Auzas, 7.

¹² Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory*, 19.

¹³ Martin Luther King Jr. "I Have a Dream." Speech, August 28, 1963 in The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/mlk01.asp

¹⁴ Ana Lucia Araujo and Francine Saillant, "Zumbi: mort, mémoire et résistance," *Frontières* 19, 1 (2007): 38.

¹⁵ About the idea of presentification see Rudolf Bernet, "Hursserl" in *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*, ed. Simon Critchley and William R. Schroeder (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 203.

¹⁶ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time," *History and Theory* 41, 2 (May 2002): 162.

¹⁷ Barack Obama. "A World That Stands as One," Berlin, July 24, 2008 in *Barack Obama, Change We Need*: <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/berlinvideo/>

¹⁸ Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union," Philadelphia, March 18, 2008 in *Barack Obama, Change We Need*: http://www.barackobama.com/2008/03/18/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_53.php

¹⁹ See Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007) and Bayo Holsey, *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

CHAPTER ONE

“ACCORDING TO MY RECKONING:” REMEMBERING AND OBSERVING SLAVERY AND EMANCIPATION

LESLIE A. SCHWALM

This essay explores the memory of slavery, and the observance of that memory, among the formerly enslaved and their descendants in the first fifty years following emancipation in the US. John Thompson – editor of a black newspaper in Des Moines, Iowa – addressed the question of slavery's remembrance during his speech in 1898 to an Emancipation Day crowd of several hundred black Midwesterners. Thompson urged his audience to recall the experiences of slavery:

Think of being compelled to live all your life with the man who is stealing the babies from your cradle and you dare not say one word; think of being compelled to associate with the despised and hated southerner who is constantly robbing you; think of being compelled to separate from your dear brother, loving sister, only father and mother, never to see them again. The agonizing groans of mothers when separated from their crying children were heart piercing. See the slave scarred veterans who are before me today and have witness to their once cruel and inhuman treatment.¹

Thompson called up this vivid recollection of the slave past only 6 months after he had narrated a very different kind of public memorial to slavery, in the form of his mother's obituary. In the latter, he documented his mother's private suffering during her 27 years of enslavement. His mother, he noted, had been bought and sold five times before she was able to take her four children and flee wartime slavery for Iowa. From this personal story of his mother's hardships, to his public call for collective witnessing to the memory of slavery's brutal violence, John Thompson demonstrated two of the ways in which African Americans remembered and memorialized slavery at the turn of the century. Thompson's

memorials also offer us an opportunity to rethink the generalizations many of us have drawn about the desires and intentions of post-emancipation black middling classes to distance themselves from the history of slavery. Like these examples, my work is rooted in a specific and perhaps unlikely regional archive – in sources generated from the black communities of the upper Midwestern states of Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin – but these sources usefully reveal the long, post-emancipation endeavor, among the formerly enslaved and their descendants, to shape what Saidiya Hartman and other scholars refer to as the “afterlife of slavery.”²

Before elaborating on this relatively unexplored archive of the memory, postmemory, and commemoration of slavery, let me offer three key points about slavery’s enduring private and public meanings among the formerly enslaved. First, I want to emphasize that the endeavors of the once-enslaved to retain, express, and defend their memories of slavery were not *only* manifested in the South. Those who remembered and commemorated an enslaved past included northern blacks who had been enslaved or had been trapped in semi-slavery during gradual emancipation; those who had been illegally held as slaves in the western, eastern, and central states of the North; and those who had fled slavery to the North and West during and immediately after the Civil War. Scattered across the continent, former slaves and their descendants called upon the nation to remember and answer for the past, contesting the post-Reconstruction culture of reunion in which slavery was portrayed as a benign and civilizing institution. Of course, among themselves, African Americans debated the meanings and uses of their collective memory of slavery: was it an unwelcome reminder of a shameful past, used by whites to deny black progress and black individuality, or was the past a valuable resource for contemporary black life and culture? How should the past be remembered and those memories, represented? Their answers, of course, varied widely.³ But their debates about the value of history and memory did not preclude African Americans across the nation from recalling and memorializing their enslaved past.

Secondly, I want to emphasize that slavery’s remembrance was expressed in a number of cultural forms. Emancipation Day celebrations and published slave narratives are the commemorative forms most commonly studied by historians, but these represent only a partial archive of how people confronted and understood the lived past. Public and private reckonings with slavery also occurred in other, relatively unstudied texts and activities, some of which I highlight here.

My third point is to urge a reconsideration of a conclusion too widely accepted by historians and literary scholars, that in the years and

generations following emancipation, African Americans generally preferred to forget their connection to and experience of slavery. To the contrary, for more than a half a century after the Civil War, former slaves in the upper Midwest claimed their traumatic memories of slavery in both private and public settings, and used those memories in their effort to challenge white Americans to recognize their full citizenship not only in the nation but in the human race. Slavery's afterlife in postbellum America was found in the memories of the formerly enslaved and the vibrant postmemories that endured in the lives and consciousness of their descendants.⁴

I use "postmemory," a concept offered by literary scholar Marianne Hirsch to plumb the collective trauma "remembered" by children of Holocaust survivors, to emphasize, as Hirsch does, the process by which cultural trauma assumes an afterlife, by becoming a family inheritance, transmitted through generations. Hirsch's term also refers to the experience of those memories, including the relationship of descending generations to the initial traumatic event. I find her conceptualization useful in considering the individual and collective memories of slavery passed down by survivors to their children and descendants. Her proposition that "postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated memories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated," finds deep resonance with African American culture, as suggested by the interviews with ex-slaves conducted in the twentieth century, but also by other sources that I discuss later in this essay.

Finally, let me offer a note on terminology: I use "history" to refer to the events of the past and rigorous reconstruction of those events by academic historians. I use "memory" to refer to direct, personal recollections of lived experience. I use "collective memory" to refer to shared experiences and those passed down through generations (much as Hirsch uses postmemory).

Sites of Memory: Emancipation Day Celebrations

One of the most vivid archives for the study of slavery's afterlife lies in the proliferation of emancipation celebrations following the Civil War. In the upper Midwest, African Americans organized hundreds of emancipation celebrations in more than 30 regional communities in the century following Emancipation.⁵ Like county and state fairs, these annual gatherings were marked by all the pleasures of sociability for a scattered rural population; surprisingly, they could attract hundreds – occasionally, thousands – of participants.⁶ Few events so richly detailed the experiential

and performative components of collective memory in black communities. Drawing on the antebellum commemorative and festive calendar, participants incorporated the solemn, formal rituals of commemoration (such as prayers, orations, and recitals), the exuberant sociability of festivals (including music, dancing, food, and drinking), the public performance of civic and expressive culture (particularly in parades and processions), and the more private elements of indoor meetings shielded from the white public gaze (including “experience meetings” held in black churches).⁷ A central component of these celebrations was a shared meal. The collective breaking of bread carried deep secular and sacred connotations, and women’s hospitality and culinary skill enhanced the social and festive element of celebrations.⁸ Like the solemn and orderly processions that reflected both the mood of the community and its claims to respectability, the amount and variety of well-prepared food was offered not only in a gesture of nurturance for the local black community, but also as a symbol of female accomplishment and black civilization.

Emancipation Day gatherings typically included a diverse programme of speech acts, most important among them the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation. (In 1876, for example, commemorative exercises in Des Moines, Iowa were suspended for two hours while organizers searched for a copy to read⁹). These readings suggest a commemorative focus that begins with the *end* of slavery, and featured speakers often focused on the present and the future state of black America. But celebrants also looked to the past, most explicitly by dedicating part of the day’s events to testimony from former slaves recalling their experience of slavery.¹⁰ This testimony kept the commemorative impact of Emancipation Day rooted in memories of slavery, created ritualized events devoted to re-experiencing and re-interpreting collective trauma, and recognized former slaves as historians of their own past.¹¹ Notably, this aspect of community remembrance was also marked by the conspicuous absence of women among those who offered public witness to their experiences of slavery – although women *did* offer their recollections in more sheltered settings (such as in black congregations). Perhaps they were not willing to be found lacking, either as individuals or as representatives of black womanhood, in female virtue. Whether men assumed or were given the role of public testimony to the experience of slavery, they manfully shielded black women from the critical gaze of white observers. Even so, like John Thompson, they emphasized the “agonizing groans of mothers” and the subjugation of slave women to the lusts of their abusive masters.

In both the roles they chose and those they avoided, women's participation also illuminated the gendered performances that helped constitute the day's commemorative activities. On horseback and in decorated carriages and wagons, women and girls appeared as living symbols of Republicanism, as Goddesses of Liberty and of Plenty. We need only remember how white men and women viewed former slave women to understand the political statement behind these roles. In the North as well as in the South, black women were expected to work in circumstances and occupations that were regarded as demeaning to white, middle-class women and denigrating to an idealized (and racialized) womanhood. When African American women dressed themselves and their daughters as goddesses and queens, and were carried by horses and wagons, they claimed for themselves and their daughters the privileged womanhood that whites actively sought to deny them. African American women no less than men, made the commemoration of slavery about the contemporary politics of race and racialized gender ideals, as well as about the centrality of the past in understanding and negotiating the present.

“According to My Reckoning”: African American Memoir

In addition to public rituals and activities that centred on collective memories of slavery and emancipation, African Americans also created narrative forms that organized and preserved, in print as well as in oral tradition, their individual experiences of slavery and its destruction. These narratives are best understood as memoir, distinguished from autobiography by a focus on particular events in history. Events, rather than the life course, form the narrative strategy of memoir. Following this usage, memoir can be understood as an act of remembering the experience of those events, but also as an effort to define those events, to illuminate and commemorate that which is being recalled – both event and experience. Through memoir, African Americans voiced their memories of the trauma of slavery and the incomplete promise of emancipation.¹²

One of the most widely-studied forms of black memoir about slavery came in the form of post-bellum slave narrative. I will limit my discussion of this form in favor of less well-studied sources, but let me note that only three of the ninety or so post-bellum narratives – written by people born in slavery, and published between 1866 and 1938 – have received intensive study. These include Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (published in 1901 and the most popular of the post-bellum narratives), Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes* (1868), and Frederick Douglass's *The Life*

and Times of Frederick Douglass (1881). These narrators emphasized their post-bellum achievements, were less concerned with exposing the harshness of slavery, and frequently portrayed literal and symbolic regional reconciliation.¹³ Scholars have generalized from them to conclude that by the turn of the century, post-bellum narrators moved away from representing the degradation of slavery and towards an emphasis on the ex-slaves' skill and potential, tools for competing in the New South and for refuting the stereotypes of scientific racism.

But if we look to other postbellum narratives, including those authored by black Midwesterners (such as those published by Moses Mosely in 1883 and Samuel Hall in 1912), we find narratives that offer no reunion, no postwar story of uplift, no effort to find a silver lining in the institution of slavery. Instead we find narratives portraying slavery as a horrific institution and denouncing slavery and slave owners, rather than enumerating the former slave's postwar achievements. At a moment in history when white Americans had willingly suspended their knowledge of and connection to the history of slavery, these narrative forms suggest a deliberative act of resistance against the tide of national forgetting.

But memoir, in addition to post-bellum slave narratives and other non-fiction writing that included autobiographical content, included a variety of forms. Memoirs of life under slavery are also found, for example, in recollections dictated for pension applications (often by barely literate Civil War veterans and their families), and lovingly-crafted obituaries (illuminating second- and third-generation "post-memories" – the inheritance, by descendants, of what could be the overwhelming and re-traumatizing memories of slavery). Their authors were influenced by a host of motivations, from partisan politics and religious or financial considerations to filio piety, and their recollections were often untethered to the kinds of documentation on which official history typically relies. Nonetheless, these memoirs offer an important collection of first-hand observations and testimony to their experience of the trauma of slavery and its lasting afterlife.

Among the most prolific but also the least studied forms of black memoir are the depositions, affidavits, and interviews contained in the pension claims of black Civil War veterans and their families. The recollections included in the pension claims of black veterans and their families are now frequently used in the study of slavery and emancipation, but rarely has this material been recognized as a form of black memoir.¹⁴

The veterans and their family members who sought pension benefits encountered an elaborate bureaucracy, marked by changing laws and procedures that were difficult to navigate, and officials who considered

black applicants to be likely perpetrators of fraudulent claims. Perhaps the most difficult obstacle in the pension claim process was the expectation that applicants provide material documentation – like marriage certificates – to support their claims. Since the majority of black soldiers (and their families) had been enslaved at the start of the war, they turned to the only substitute for official documentation to which they had access: their own sworn testimony and that of family members, neighbors, comrades, commanding officers, and occasionally, former owners, affirming the details and veracity of their own recollections of family and military histories. Deponents who testified to dates of births and deaths, to slave marriages, to their wartime flight, simultaneously testified to the traumas of slavery: multiple sales, involuntary familial and marital separations, sexual exploitation at the hands of overseers and slave owners.¹⁵ Of course, given the fact that pension claims were initiated with the goal of financial gain, the collected depositions and affidavits did not always represent an objective truth. Still, the claim process – which was more likely to reject black applicants than white, and which required extensive testimonial support for the claims made by former slaves – also served as a filter, adding credence to the memories of those who made successful claims.¹⁶ Through these individual and collective memoirs of slave life, African Americans committed their experience of slavery to an official, semi-public record. As the nation's dominant Civil War memories – and “official history” – moved towards sectional reconciliation and as the war's military legacy increasingly subsumed its emancipationist consequences, pension claims became one of the largest repositories of black memoir about slavery, the war, and the destruction of American bondage.

Obituaries constitute another significant but surprisingly unexplored form through which slavery was memorialized. Although death notices and obituaries typically designate the end of a life, in the instance of the black press, obituaries also created an archive of black memoir. Whether crafted by grieving family members or a newspaper's editorial staff, the obituaries that documented the passing of former slaves offer a rich window into individual and intergenerational memories of slavery and emancipation. Before the emergence of clear distinctions between death notices (paid advertisements announcing date, time, and location of funeral services) and the professionally – authored obituary (a summary of the deceased's life), the black press carried elegiac accounts, often excluding specific information about services and burial, and focusing instead on the life experiences of the deceased. Obituaries for former slaves offered an explicit counterpoint to the amnesia of reunion, through their carefully-

crafted stories of the deceased's survival of specific traumas of slavery, the chaos of war and migration, and of their lives in freedom.¹⁷

Consider the obituary John Thompson crafted to commemorate his mother's death in February, 1898.¹⁸ This obituary was typical in its specific accounting of the human costs of slavery – sales, separations, and disrupted families, among them. The obituary also makes clear the role his mother played in her own emancipation. Taking her children, she fled slavery, and found work in rural Iowa as a farm hand in order to support her family. Even as popular white writers were delighting southern and northern white readers alike with stories enacting national reconciliation and featuring faithful slaves, the families and descendants of former slaves – in conjunction with black newspaper publishers – were memorializing personal and collective histories, which they refused to hide or regard with shame. Instead they wrote obituaries that included the names of slave owners who bought and sold and separated enslaved families like so many chattel, as if to denote where the real shame of slavery ought to be laid. In the obituary, African Americans created a commemorative form in which they laid claim to their family's inheritance of memories of enslavement, survival, and self-emancipation. Through the public nature of the obituary, personal and family memoir was transformed into collective memory; and through the documentarian specificity of their recollections, African Americans deployed memoir as a form of history-writing, as well.¹⁹

In conclusion, in contemporary accounts of Emancipation Day celebrations, in post-bellum slave narratives, in pension claims and in obituaries, lies a rich archive of memory and memorialization that reveals a significant investment in the afterlife of slavery. Whether or not it was a useful or useable past, and whether or not it was a contested past, those who had once been enslaved, as well as their descendants, retained, expressed, and memorialized their individual, familial, and collective histories of slavery.

Notes

¹ Newspaper clipping, August 4, 1898, "Ethnicity-Negro" folder, vertical file, Keokuk Public Library. Thompson was then editor of the *Bystander*, Iowa's most prominent black newspaper. His mother, Catherine Shepard Thompson, was born into slavery in Missouri. She brought her children to Ringgold County, Iowa, during the Civil War, moving to Decatur City and then to Des Moines by 1866. See her obituary, *Iowa State Bystander*, November 20, 1903. Thompson edited the *Bystander* from 1896 until 1919. He earned his law degree in 1898, was the only African American to pass the state bar exam that year, and was the second black Iowan admitted to

practice law in federal courts. Allen W. Jones, "Equal Rights to All, Special Privileges to None: The Black Press in Iowa, 1882-1985," in *The Black Press in the Middle West, 1865-1985*, ed. Henry Lewis Suggs (Westport, CT, 1996), 77. This essay draws from my book, *Emancipation's Diaspora* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming).

² Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007).

³ Charles Chesnutt's short story, "The Wife of His Youth," *Atlantic Monthly* (July 1898): 55-61, offers a poignant exploration of these conflicting forces of memory and amnesia among former slaves.

⁴ See Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22, but also Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). On distinguishing memory from history, see David Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 2.

⁵ Based on research in numerous state newspapers, as well as the *New York Times* and the *Christian Recorder* (published by the AME Church), from the 1850s through 1963. Although by no means a complete survey of the region's celebrations, my research has identified over 200 celebrations across the state of Iowa alone. More fragmentary evidence of Wisconsin and Minnesota suggests that celebrations became more popular in those states later in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth centuries.

⁶ The *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, August 2, 1894, reported a gathering of over two hundred at a Racine (Wisconsin) celebration; the *Stevens Point Gazette*, August 10, 1910, reported a gathering in Oshkosh of over 300. For Keokuk whites' hostility toward the growing African American population of the city, see, for example, *Keokuk Daily Constitution*, September 5, 1862.

⁷ This analysis of the history of public commemoration among African Americans draws on a rich literature, including: Mitch Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally, ed. *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); William B. Gravely, "The Dialectic of Double-Consciousness in Black American Freedom Celebrations, 1808-1865," *Journal of Negro History* 67 (1982): 302-17; Kathleen Clark, "Celebrating Freedom: Emancipation Day Celebrations and African American Memory in the Early Reconstruction South," in *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2000), 107-32; W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "No Deed But Memory," *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, 1-28; Shane White, "'It Was a Proud Day': African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-1834," *Journal of American History* 81 (1994): 13-50; William H. Wiggins Jr., *O Freedom! Afro-American Emancipation Celebrations* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987); Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North

Carolina Press, 2002), 54-81; and B. W. Higman, "Remembering Slavery: The Rise, Decline and Revival of Emancipation Day in the English-Speaking Caribbean," *Slavery and Abolition* 19 (1998): 90-105.

⁸ *Christian Recorder*, August 15 1863, November 13, 1873, March 4, 1890; Oshkosh [Wisconsin] *Daily Northwestern*, August 1, 1877 and August 2, 1890; Madison [Wisconsin] *Democrat*, October 2, 1912.

⁹ *Iowa State Register*, August 2, 1876; *Iowa State Register*, August 2, 1866; see also Burlington *Daily Hawk-Eye*, August 2, 1894; and *Iowa State Bystander*, January 4, 1901 and August 16, 1901. For a thoughtful overview of current popular and scholarly debates about the Emancipation Proclamation, see Ira Berlin, "Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and Its Meaning," in *Union & Emancipation: Essays on Politics and Race in the Civil War Era*, ed. David W. Blight and Brooks D. Simpson (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1997), 105-21.

¹⁰ Here, I depart from the brilliant work of Mitch Kachun in studying Emancipation Day celebrations. Kachun, drawing on contemporary observers like Theophilus Steward and T. Thomas Fortune, finds that communities inattentive to regular Emancipation Day celebrations were expressing a desire to forget the history of slavery (Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*, 177).

¹¹ My understanding of the process of collectivizing slavery's trauma draws on Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*.

¹² David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Boston: Belknap Press, 2001), 231-37. The quote in the subheading comes from an interview with Ansel Clark, published in the *Chicago Defender*, January 1, 1949.

¹³ William L. Andrews, "Reunion in the Post-bellum Slave Narrative: Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Keckley," *Black American Literature Forum* 23, 1 (Spring 1989): 5. Other studies of the post-bellum slave narrative include William L. Andrews, "The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Literary Realism, 1865-1920" in *Slavery and The Literary Imagination*, ed. Debora E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 62-80 and William L. Andrews, "Towards a Poetics of Afro-American Autobiography," in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Patricia Redmond (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 78-104; Frances Smith Foster, *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Jennifer Fleischner, *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family, and Identity in Women's Slave Narratives* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); and Carolyn Sorisio, "Unmasking the Genteel Performer: Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes* and the Politics of Public Wrath," *African American Review* 34, 1 (2000): 19-28.

¹⁴ See, for example, Elizabeth Regosin, *Freedom's Promise: Ex-Slave Families and Citizenship in The Age of Emancipation* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002); Donald R. Shaffer, *After the Glory: The Struggles of Black Civil War Veterans* (Lawrence: University Pres of Kansas, 2004); Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight For We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's*

Women: Black Women and Families in Civil Era Mississippi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Nancy D. Bercaw, *Gendered Freedoms: Race, Rights, and the Politics of the Household in the Delta, 1861-1875* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

¹⁵ Affid. by Emmeline Porter, January 16, 1922, pension file of Joseph Porter, IC 482911; Deposition by Fanny Robison, October 12, 1904, pension file of John R. Robison, WC 586639; affid. by Victoria Wakefield, March 4, 1925, in pension file of Henry Wakefield, WC 961264.

¹⁶ On the rate of rejections, see Regosin, *Freedom's Promise*, 19.

¹⁷ See, for example, the following obituaries in the *Iowa Bystander*: Margaret Rose (March 23, 1896); Susan White (May 31, 1901); Mrs. Jennie Bell (February 13, 1903); Mary Anne Shephard (November 20, 1903); Nathan E. Morton (February 10, 1905); Henry Bell (May 14, 1909). In the *Chicago Defender*, see Robert T. Motts (July 22 1911), Ansel Clark (April 30, 1932; May 7, 1932); Curry Reed (July 16, 1938); Henry Mack (April 14, 1945). In the *Burlington Hawkeye*, see Irene McPike (May 11, 1900).

¹⁸ *Iowa State Bystander*, February 18, 1898.

¹⁹ On the cultural history of death and obituary in black history, see Lois Brown, "Memorial Narratives of African Women in Antebellum New England," *Legacy* 20: 1 & 2 (2003): 38-61, and Karla FC Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).