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Slavery and Transnational Memory: The Making of New Publics

> At the turn-of-the-century, Sea Island Gullahs, descendants of African Captives, remained isolated from the mainland of South Carolina and Georgia. As a result of their isolation, the Gullah created and maintained a distinctive, imaginative and original African American culture. Gullah communities recalled, remembered and recollected much of what their ancestors brought with them from Africa […]. (*Daughters of the Dust*, 1991)

The film *Daughters of the Dust* opens with sounds and images crafted to evoke a sense of memory and communal recollection.[1] Set in 1902, the film shows several generations of the Gullah community grappling with the problem of memory: is the legacy of the past that which moves one forward or what must be left behind? Today, the community featured in the dramatic setting of the film is part of a larger commemorated region, recently named the Gullah Geechee National Heritage Corridor. In support of this recognition, residents work to make their cultural heritage visible with objects that represent their place in the region and their rights to the land. The region's historical importance provides a place from which to discuss public memory and the making of new publics.[2]

I use the term *public memory* to signal the process by which a group of people who were once dismissed and never thought of as part of a 'public' might become visible to themselves and to others – a public – through their use of memory. I invoke public memory in conversation with more commonly recognized terms, such as *collective memory* and *social memory*. In contrast to the fields these terms evoke, my interest is in the very processes of making communal identity and in the formation of emergent subjectivities. This requires an explicit departure from un-

1 I wish to express my appreciation to the participants of the Sea Island Field School, to Ms. Georgette Mayo, Ms. Deborah Wright and the team at the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture and to Dr. Dale Rosengarten of the College of Charleston. I am grateful to Dr. J. Herman Blake who inspires critical thought about the place of the scholar in public debates. I appreciate the editors' careful attention and thoughtful suggestions. Their efforts have made an invaluable contribution to the development of this essay. Finally, I thank Kathryn Chetkovitch, Anna Tsing and Claudia Engel for their generous and considerate comments.

2 For further information on the Heritage Corridor, see the official website: www.gullahgeecheecorridor.org (accessed 21 March 2014).

derstandings of memory that assume a basis in personally experienced, remembered events. Rather than evoking actual events of history from which subjects enact their past, public memory directs our attention to the very process of how new publics come into being and the ways in which new subjectivities are formed by public cultural forms and by an ever-circulating set of ideas that turns into an emergent possibility.[3]

Jürgen Habermas' notion of the public sphere is relevant (1989), but my use of public memory extends his idea of publics as well as Michael Warner's idea of counterpublics (2002). In contrast to Habermas' notion, in which the public is already assumed, my attention is drawn to those, such as the Gullah Geechee community, who were rarely included in normative ideas about who counts as a member of the public sphere. The ability of this community to gain recognition, and to recognize itself in a new way, comes about in part through interventions such as Julie Dash's film, which evoke new publics through cinematic images and the crafting of broadly circulating memories. Publics are created through technologies of practice and performance that are inspired by consumable, vernacular forms. Performative gestures, acts and style, for example, can make one see oneself through the reactions and responses of others. Public cultural forms inspire, and indeed coax, a sense of identity. Collective imaginaries are always in process.

My concern with memory, then, is targeted at the mobilization of the past to motivate contemporary outlooks and newly emerging publics. Such mobilization occurs in and through what I call 'projects,' that is, more or less coherent sets of discourses and practices. Projects draw from both official and vernacular sources; they may work simultaneously as discipline and as rebellion. They need not pit 'the state' against 'society.' Instead, to use the terms of Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci, they emerge in structures of feeling and emergent hegemonies. Memory projects require articulation in both its senses (Hall 1980a; 1980b). On the one hand, they create *links* between once-neglected pasts and presents-in-the-making; on the other hand, they *express* subjectivities appropriate to carry such pasts into the future. Within such articulations, tensions and contradictions come to inhabit memory projects, and these *both* give memory projects their traction *and* refuse to let them transcend the moment. Thus memory projects shift historically, and one of the purposes of this essay is to discuss some important changes in the memory of slavery in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Rather than

3 A number of recent volumes use the term "public memory" in ways that resonate with collective and social memory; see, for example, Phillips (2004); Phillips and Mitchell (2011); Demo and Bradford (2012).

assuming an opposition between state and society, using the concept of memory project allows me to see such oppositions, themselves, as developments within particular memory formations, which shift with political struggles and the meanings of historical events.

Expressive practices form elements within memory projects. In this essay, I examine several such practices within turn-of-the-century projects for mobilizing black American memories: a film, a place for contemplation, and a heritage tour. Each of these shows how articulations work within memory: pasts are brought to bear on evolving presents, and in the process, tensions both specify and energize potential audiences. Specification creates divisions between those interpellated and those left outside particular memory projects. Specification also sets up relations with others – whether institutional others, such as the state, or other configurations of personal identity. The dynamics of specification mean that memory projects are always sites of struggle as inclusion and exclusion are negotiated.

The specificity of those included in a memory project is also a sleight of hand. Memory projects only work because of resonance with other related projects. This resonance makes memory projects legible, and it allows them to simultaneously call out a specific group and make a claim on a universal ethics. In this way, too, they are always transnational even as they make national, regional, and local claims. Memory projects require transnational resources to make specific pasts meaningful as "engaged universals" (Tsing 2005). In this essay, the resonance between memorializations of the Holocaust and of slavery illustrates this point.

Each memory project also resonates with earlier ones. In the United States, the Holocaust-slavery resonance depends on a previous memory project from the early twentieth century, associated with the New Deal's Works Progress Administration and its attempt to document American folk cultures. This mobilized a tension between black and white memories at the heart of populist memorialization, and this tension, I argue, is the ground upon which later memory projects build.

The focus of much of my discussion is the regional site that opens this essay, the Southeastern coast of the United States where Gullah Geechee communities reside. This area has particular significance to US American history, for it is the region where much of the early accumulation of capitalist wealth of the United States happened – mostly thanks to the large-scale coerced-labor system and the ingenuity of African and African diasporic enslaved peoples who worked plantation crops such as rice and cotton. Their efforts upheld the US national economy

up through the nineteenth century.[4] As the area with the largest concentration of enslaved Africans in the US, the Sea Island people have been represented as a community with distinctive cultural practices, as Dash suggests in the opening quote from her film.

This was not always a celebrated history. Many of the local cultural practices were considered by the wider community as antithetical to the progress narratives of modernization. But this very fact made the Sea Islands look like a research laboratory to social scientists including ethnographers and linguists. They generally portrayed this place as a culture under glass, a place deeply entrenched in 'African' traditions, and memory was typically cast as preserved material, contained and embodied.[5] Stories of the remoteness of the region and the "isolation" of many of the islanders have consequently made the Sea Islands the *Ur* site of memory for black Americans.

A good deal of our contemporary understanding of Gullah Geechee culture comes from records collected by the Works Progress Administration during the New Deal. As soon as we recognize how these materials were gathered, it becomes obvious that they were themselves part of a memory project, and not merely neutral collections. Thus, it seems important to begin my investigation of contemporary memorialization that enrolls Gullah Geechee materials with this earlier project, the contradictions and tensions of which are the architecture of more recent initiatives.

Memory work and the WPA

The first public memory project I focus on then is a national initiative from the 1930s, in which ordinary citizens helped invent the nation. Their recollections and reflections on everyday practices helped make places and regions part of national identity. This model of national memory making took inspiration from European romantic ideas of folk culture and its importance in the making of a national identity.[6]

4 For a discussion of the distinctive cultural and economic importance of African Americans to the history of this region, see Carney (2001) and Stewart (1996).

5 Gullah Geechee culture was by definition transnational for enslaved Africans' journey to the New World, the Caribbean and the United States hinged on the mixing of remembered practices with their new cultural encounters. See Dow Turner (1949); Herskovits (1958); and Jones-Jackson (1987) for a discussion of linguistic retentions.

6 See Anderson (1983) for a discussion of the rise of nationalism and the role of culture in that process. Also see Filene's (2000) discussion of the influence of late eighteenth- and early nine-

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was a US government project that became a major part of Depression-era President Franklin Roosevelt's effort to put a burgeoning number of unemployed citizens to work as public works employees. Many New Deal workers were tasked with rebuilding the nation's infrastructure, including roads and public buildings. More pertinent to this discussion, artists and writers were also employed under the New Deal programs, some of them recruited to work under the Federal Writers Project as fieldworkers, writers, artists and photographers who documented the folkways and stories of ordinary people. Their efforts led to the production of local cultural history. In terms of my concept, this may be seen as a public memory project, simultaneously state-initiated and grassroots. A number of WPA guides to US states were written, which included stories about ways of life based on remembered practices. Neglected rural communities were particularly prominent in this ethnographic project. Those whose memories had not previously been considered significant were central to it. New publics were in the making.

Yet the project was full of contradictions and tensions. The WPA researchers encountered difficulties in attempting to include certain groups within the general body. One contributor, writer James Agee (2013 [1936]), noted that southern white American interviewees refused to participate if blacks were included in the project. As a consequence, a separate set of interviews gathered together black Americans' stories, documenting cultural practices whose categories were very similar to those of their white counterparts. One exception to these similarities in accounts of everyday vernacular practices were the interviews with elderly black Americans who had lived part of their lives as enslaved children. The question of African cultural continuities and what interviewees remembered about Africa drew the attention of many researchers.

The Federal Writers project both sustained segregation and became a resource for black American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston who was, for a brief period, employed as a field researcher for the WPA. Hurston went on to become famous for her novels about southern black culture. Hurston's work as a folklorist and novelist drew attention to black southern culture and in turn became a resource that later cultural producers could draw upon. The WPA collection was also available for Julie Dash, who drew upon early interviews in writing the script for *Daughters of the Dust*.[7] The WPA collection, which consisted of transcriptions of interviews, helped later cultural producers generate a sense of what the early infor-

teenth-century European ideas about folk culture and the impact this had on twentieth-century US American ideas about folk culture.

7 See Dash's (1992) discussion of the making of the film.

mants might have recalled about their lives.[8] More significantly, pieces of these accounts could be fashioned into something beyond an account of the actual incidents that were already long removed from immediate recollection. These materials and stories contributed greatly to a new moment of public memory.

New public memory projects in the United States followed the big changes initiated by WWII: decolonization, the formation of new international governance regimes, and, as of the 1970s, the spread of the memory of the Holocaust. In the memory projects of the late 20th century, national integration through ethnography was no longer the point. Instead, international recognition stood out as both a goal and a strategy for making these projects legible. These new projects, then, were always transnational in their composition, even as they made claims to reworking national spaces. Ethical questions imagined as universal were at the heart of this turn, which centered around the politics of recognition. To unravel the contours of this shift in my discussion of transnationally inflected memory, the next section introduces analytic tools that are useful for my discussion of three projects that show the interface between the Holocaust and black American memory.

Transnational chains of recognition

How are memory projects made at different scales, including the local, national, and transnational? One notable discussion about memory's transnational entanglements is offered by Michael Rothberg, whose work *Multidirectional Memory* (2009) highlights the kinds of transnational dialogues that take place across memorial communities. In particular, Rothberg's work makes visible the dynamic intellectual exchange between postcolonial and Holocaust studies. The transnational discussions that followed WWII reveal the productive working of conversations that move across geographic regions and communities. My analytic approach for this essay takes inspiration from Rothberg's critique of the inherent problems with competitive memory projects that depend upon hierarchies of trauma and his focus on what these memorial disputes conceal, namely, resonances and borrowings, which are a key feature of remembrance processes. Furthermore, he pays special attention to how publics are formed in dialogues across memory projects:

8 See Georgia Writers' Project (1940); Chandler (2008).

> The understanding of collective remembrance that I put forward in *Multidirectional Memory* challenges the basic tenets and assumption of much current thinking on collective memory and group identity. Fundamental to the conception of competitive memory is a notion of the public sphere as a pregiven, limited space in which already-established groups engage in a life-and-death struggle. In contrast, pursuing memory's multidirectionality encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others; both the subjects and spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction. (Rothberg 2009, 5)

My reading is further enriched by Anna Tsing's toolkit for analyzing globalization processes (2005). Her term "friction," which at first sight appears counterintuitive, refers not so much to tensions and conflicts, but to "global connections" that in turn show the "grip" of encounter. "Rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick. As a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power" (Tsing 2005, 5).

I draw upon the insights of Tsing, who proposes ways to analyze global processes that highlight things coming into being. While Rothberg reads the relationship between memories and groups as conversations and dialogues, Tsing's concepts such as "gaps," "contingencies," and "articulations" prove particularly useful for my exploration into the performative elements of vernacular culture. Attention to the emergent and enacted possibilities found in performances allows for an appreciation of how vernacular audiences are drawn into debates about memory. In contrast to Rothberg, my work includes a full variety of cultural productions, from elite writings to folktales, and from state directives to everyday performances. I focus on practices and cultural forms that mobilize both local and global publics.

The emergence of new publics

How did the Holocaust become a stimulus for public memory? It took cultural work, both local and global, to reconceptualize the Holocaust so that it could function as an agreed-upon focus for traumatic memory; only from the 1970s onwards, according to Levy and Sznaider (2006), did the Holocaust come to serve as a referent for other public memory projects. Levy and Sznaider provide a helpful chronology, showing that, after a postwar decade of relative silence, the Holocaust became important as a signpost of ethical citizenship in Europe in the 1960s, and was used to keep European nationalism in check. In Levy and Sznaider's sce-

nario, the Holocaust as a framework for discussion of the horrors of the past only spread beyond Europe in the 1970s. These authors further argue that by the 1990s, the Holocaust had been reconfigured as a decontextualized event oriented toward nation-transcending symbols.

It is at that point, too, that the history of transatlantic slavery entered discussions of public memory. What proved distinctive about emergent publics in the 1970s is that these historical events, and the ways they had come to be 'remembered,' that is, mobilized for the present, enabled a range of groups to narrate their own group's experience in a particular way. A key departure in how the past could be remembered, and more specifically, framed, was the introduction of an affective vocabulary that allowed the significance of a particular trauma to spread to a wider group. Words such as genocide, trauma, Holocaust, victim, memory, and testimony entered public discourse and helped groups across a wide spectrum insert themselves in history (see, e.g., Fassin and Rechtman 2009). In the subsequent formation of multiple memory projects, new publics formed dialogically – and in friction. Thus even Holocaust memories must be understood through wider dialogue. Moving beyond Levy and Sznaider's analysis, Rothberg's approach allows us to look at concrete histories of interplay in the making of each of these public memories; in the late twentieth century, Holocaust and slavery memory projects had significant effects on the way each project was shaped.

Fourteen years before Dash's film appeared, the television miniseries *Roots* (1977) captivated the attention of audiences in the United States and beyond. Based on a novel by Alex Haley (1976), the story's main character, Kunta Kinte, vividly brought to life the reality of an enslaved person. Over the course of several evenings, Kinte's story brought presence and an immediacy to the experience of slavery. Viewers watched as Africans were snatched away from their lives in The Gambia and put on ships to the New World. The captives arrived in chains, only to find that they would be further subjected to harsh treatment under the "peculiar institution" that was the US system of slavery. The same director, Marvin J. Chomsky, was responsible for both *Roots* and *Holocaust* (1978), a second television miniseries that followed a year later. The latter was to become one of the key triggers and sites of the new memory of the Holocaust. Once again, over the course of several evenings, a story of erasure was told; in this case, the story of Jews being rounded up and put into camps and eventually put to death in gas chambers drew the attention of wide-ranging audiences. Many viewers of both dramas were engaging with these historical events for the first time.

These early television series drew considerable attention, and they helped stimulate the emergence of new memory narratives on both the Holocaust and slavery. Novels such as William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (1979) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), as many have noted, effectively narrated the dilemmas for

Jewish and black characters and thus introduced a critical turn and a key departure in how the past could be remembered, and more specifically narrated, for audiences who were not likely to have had a prior sense of their history as it was told in these public ways. What these two novels accomplished was to provide a way of framing the ethical paradoxes that a subjugated person faced and their working through of the moral conflicts of their action. Both novels became major motion pictures, once again drawing large audiences, in the United States and beyond. Both built new public memories within which new subjectivities could be imagined. It was not just those who had been the actual victims of the historic state-sponsored atrocities who were to be remembered, but also the generations who came after them and who understood their group's identity and history as intimately bound by crimes too horrible to mention. Marianne Hirsch (2008) uses the term "post-memory generation" to refer to people who did not directly experience the Holocaust but for whom the experience felt no less real. These groups could insert their public memory-based history into an international discourse that tried to name the after-effects. What happened in the last part of the twentieth century was the circulation of a lexicon beyond the specific community of Holocaust survivors – a lexicon for describing the emotional residue of horrendous crimes.

Holocaust memory helped audiences imagine other histories in new ways. The articulation of Holocaust memory categories and vocabularies generated a way of thinking about self-making and interiority. It opened up possibilities for people or groups, particularly black Americans and other minority groups who were not typically granted an interiorized humanity or a recognizable way to speak about their suffering. What the 1990s discourse around memory achieved is an understanding of trauma, public responsibility, and moral sentiment that intervened in public discourse in new ways and inspired new publics. This was possible because of a multidirectional dialogue – and thus legibility – across memory projects.

One of the most influential contributors to such circulations has been Nobel Prize winning novelist and essayist Toni Morrison, who draws resonating parallels between the Jewish Holocaust and the Middle Passage. Morrison imagines her work as an intervention into public understandings of memory that move beyond a single community. Putting black American memory in self-conscious dialogue with other groups' experiences, including those of Holocaust survivors, Morrison's work is an exploration of the interiority of the traumatic experience. In her essay "Site of Memory," Morrison brings new nuances into the European discussion of memory. In contrast to Nora's use of the concept of "sites of memory" (e.g., Nora 1989), for Morrison this opens up a discussion of tensions and contradictions, akin to Tsing's "frictions." Rather than connoting a gap between state

histories and subaltern memories, Morrison's sites of memory encompass both official and vernacular knowledge, as well as local and transnational struggles. For example, slave narratives, that is, personal experiences of the horrors of slavery found in the published accounts of enslaved people, make use of Enlightenment conventions of representation at the same time that they exceed them. Slave narratives build the rational subject position of the teller, yet they also show the limits of such subject positions. Morrison explains her intervention to delve into such limits, arguing that slave narratives never disclose the full traumatic impact of slavery. In those very places where the violence of slavery threatens to undermine the rational subject position of the teller, it is curtained from view. "[O]ver and over," Morrison explains, "the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, 'but let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate'" (1987a: 109–110). As a result, the narrators and their readers are protected from the troubling – yet also empowering – features of internal psychological dynamics, as these are shaped by trauma. "Most importantly – at least for me," Morrison continues, "There was no mention of [the narrators'] interior life." This becomes the site of Morrison's own intervention. "For me – a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman … [m]y job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'"(1987a: 109–110). Morrison narrates trauma, with all of its consequences for the formation of identity. From the beginning, she recognizes this as a public historical task: the task of creating public memory.

Morrison explores trauma and the way it forms a zone of tension across state histories and subaltern memories. It is a palpable force in the present, she argues, even as it draws from the past. It can kill without physical contact and leave everyone staggering in what Morrison refers to as "rememory." Men and women try to rebuild their lives but never leave behind the damaging effects of slavery. On rememory, Marianne Hirsch adds: "Rememory is neither memory nor forgetting, but memory combined with (the threat of) repetition; it is neither noun nor verb, but both combined. Rememory is Morrison's attempt to re-conceive the memory of slavery, finding a way to re-member, and to do so *differently*, what an entire culture has been trying to repress" (1994, 94).

A critical text for black American memory, Morrison's novel *Beloved* is an exploration of the haunted contradictions of rememory. The characters cannot get over slavery even after its abolition, but continually work through the space of trauma. In this, the novel joins a transnational dialogue between the memory of slavery and the memory of the Holocaust. Note the dedication of *Beloved*: "To Sixty Million and More." This was much to the alarm of some, as Morrison's dedication recalls the figure of six million commonly associated with the number of

Holocaust victims.[9] The novel's plot is inspired by a nineteenth-century newspaper article about an escaped slave woman who kills her young daughter to prevent her from being returned to slavery; this woman, Margaret Gardner, became the character Sethe in Morrison's fictional account. This character's founding trauma crushes any sense of innocent purpose and makes it clear that survival is a troubled, and yet a courageous goal. Morrison's characters overall have a deep and rich interior self, which entitles them to respect as ethical modern citizens.

Consider the parallels with the novel *Sophie's Choice* (1979), in which William Styron tells the story of a woman haunted by the choice she has been asked to make between her two children since she is not able to save them both from the maws of the Holocaust. Her subsequent insanity stands for that of her people; she, like Sethe, is the mother who cannot protect her children. Public memory emerges here, as in Morrison's novel, in the forming of icons of trauma, icons who are not just individual victims but ones who share in a much broader incapacity to continue as before. As intellectual and artistic space becomes occupied by such figures, memory does not dissipate but draws all sides – whites, blacks, Christians, Jews – into anguished dilemmas. This is not a glorification of victims, but an exploration of continuing contradictions *within* rememory.

In 2005, Morrison undertook a more explicit collaboration with a Jewish composer when she joined forces with Richard Danielpour to complete an operatic version of the story of Margaret Garner. Danielpour says of the project:

> More than anything else, Margaret Garner is an opera that reminds us that we all belong to the same human family, and it demonstrates what can happen when we forget this fundamental truth. While slavery has been outlawed in the United States since 1865, its lingering effects have proven over the years that the issues in our country concerning race, class, and the true meaning of freedom are in no way resolved. Visiting Washington DC today, one can see memorials to heroes from every war and cause, but there is not one memorial to the people who suffered under the institution of slavery. It is my hope that Margaret Garner will both memorialize and remind us of what we as a society are so easily inclined to forget. (Danielpour 2005)

Danielpour traces the idea for the collaboration to his earlier reading of a book of poetry by runaway slaves, which deeply inspired him. As in the cases discussed by Michael Rothberg, the collaboration between Morrison and Danielpour demonstrates how alliances and conversations across communities can inspire moments of mutual recognition and empathy, and propel both memory and solidarity.

9 For an extended discussion of the problems of the comparison between the Holocaust and slavery, see Zierler (2004).

Some interpreters understand Morrison as highlighting the dichotomy between elite and subaltern memory work (see, for example, Hartman 1994). As numerous critics have demonstrated, Morrison's work is subtle and calls up many readings (see Smith 2012). In my reading, Morrison's sites of memory are not an attempt to banish state histories in favor of the purity of grassroots memory. Instead, she explores the contaminated space where these categories overlap and shape each other, thus allowing trauma not to be a benediction but rather the continuing curse we all navigate to survive. In what follows, I present three illustrations of the productiveness of Morrison's understanding of 'site of memory.' In each of the following cultural performances, public memory work is split with internal struggles – the fallout of multiple positionings in regard to official histories – even as it asserts its difference.

Site of memory 1: a film revival

Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) is one of several memory initiatives that, like *Beloved*, helped to inspire a new public. Over the twenty-five years that have passed since the film first opened in major movie theaters, the film's popularity has grown exponentially. When it first appeared, the film was greeted in many circles with ambivalence because the ways of knowing or remembering that it presented were not familiar to many viewers, not even to those with regional ties to the US South. Some residents from the area were unhappy with the film, fearing that the region's distinctive culture would once again make the Sea Islands appear too exotic. The film played only briefly. Yet, in 2004 *Daughters of the Dust* was inducted into the US National Registry of films. It is now often publically screened in the United States and elsewhere in the world. How has this film come to cross back and forth between state histories and subaltern memories?

From the first, the film opened up tensions between local and more distant audiences. *Daughters of the Dust* used a series of props to offer a sense of place. Newsprint wallpaper, a bottle tree, hands stained blue from indigo dye, an old semi-submerged figure from a slave ship, a weathered Koran left by the shore – all brought the materiality of memory to life. Local people had been taught that their culture was an impediment to progress. Nonlocal audiences were also put off. Many viewers, both black and white, found the cultural practices represented in the film difficult to understand and the characters' language incomprehensible.

In the years since its release in 1991, however, appreciation for the movie's significance in generating a sense of public awareness of Gullah Geechee culture has been evident in outpourings of support for it. The film has won a number of

awards and is being shown widely. The film itself has gathered a past; its story of memories is itself collecting memories through engaging with the productive space between the official and the vernacular. Some of those at a conference I attended at the College of Charleston's Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture in 2011 to commemorate the anniversary of the film's release, claimed their appreciation of the film even when it was first released, but others admitted that when they first watched the film they could not understand what was happening or understand what the characters were saying. What they did appreciate, though, was the beauty of the place and the characters. Because several years later there was much more awareness of Gullah Geechee culture, these viewers could now better understand the profound contribution of Dash's work. What has emerged over the last two decades is a public culture in which memory, by black Americans and others, has become much more prevalent and part of a robust discourse, both local and transnational, both state-sponsored and grassroots.

As viewed today, Julie Dash's film mobilizes this wider trend by mining contradictions and tensions. On one level, the film is a simple depiction of the Gullah Geechee community. It presents artifacts and sensibilities that provide a sense of a day in the life of an island family as some of the members are about to depart for the US North and thus seek a future elsewhere. The film has other stakes, however: it depicts a future in the grip of Morrisonian rememory, in which the tensions of multiple positionings are the conditions for moving on. One of the characters is a specter yet to reach mortal status, called the Unborn Child. The Unborn Child was conceived by rape, and the quarrels about her rape-stained future pervade the film. The Unborn Child also witnesses other quarrels about strategies for survival vis-à-vis dominant institutions. It is she who not only gets a glimpse of the world as it is but who can also cast a future for herself *beyond* the world as it is. Through her projection into the future for herself, film viewers are brought into the possibilities of an emergent world. The Unborn Child, which stands for the emergent and the yet-to-come aspect of Dash's work, represents this space for imagining new publics, in all their contradictions.

Consider Dash's future cast in dialogue with Derrida's distinction between the future and *l'avenir* (interviewed in *Derrida*, 2002):

> The future is that which – tomorrow, later, next century – will be. There's a future, which is predictable, programmed, scheduled, and foreseeable. But there is a future, 'avenir' (to come) which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future – that which is totally unpredictable. The Other, who comes without me being able to anticipate their arrival. So if there's a real future beyond this other known future, it's l'avenir in that it's the coming of the *Other* when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival.

Site of memory 2: the bench and the fort

As memories of slavery have become part of the US museum landscape, they have carried with them the tense interplay between official and vernacular, black and white, and multiple positionings. We see this in particular in commemorative activities 'added on' to state memorialization, such as a bench for contemplation of slave memories, in the shadow of a fort. The National Park Service administers both the bench and the fort. They are both elements in state memorialization. But they are crafted to evoke separate affect worlds, and in this crafted difference, in all its in-and-out engagements with state categories, we can see rememory – and its making of new publics.

The bench I visited, located on Sullivan's Island, in South Carolina, was installed in 2008 at the instigation of the Toni Morrison Society. The bench looks out on one of the ports of arrival of the ships that carried enslaved Africans to the United States. The bench aims to sponsor contemplation on the heritage of slavery and its traumas. The idea for this commemoration came from a speech given by Morrison, who had said in 1988:

> There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of, slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence, or better still, on the banks of the Mississippi. (Morrison 1989)[10]

In recent years, the National Park Service has extended the earlier story of the significance of the fort that looms over the bench, by including the story of the transatlantic slave trade. At the same time, the fort's main story and indeed attraction for most visitors is its military presence in wars including the American Revolutionary War. It also served as a barrier against northern forces during the US Civil War, as South Carolina hoped to secede rather than give up slavery. The two commemorative histories are intertwined – yet separated by performative practices that evoke varied affects.

The installation of the bench transformed the site into a space of both celebration and mourning. A procession of three hundred people, including members of the Toni Morrison Society along with community members from Charleston,

10 See also the website of the Toni Morrison Society, www.tonimorrisonsociety.org/bench.html (accessed 21 March 2014).

South Carolina, placed the bench. In their ceremony, they recalled that Sullivan's Island was the first site of medical inspection as ships approached Charleston. Many passengers had survived the long journey in deplorable conditions. Before the ships' arrival on the island, sick passengers would be dumped overboard so as not to raise suspicion about the health of others on board. If ship captains suspected or discovered illness among its human cargo, once the ship had docked those who were ill would remain on the quarantined island for several weeks. Some forty percent of the enslaved Africans brought to the US first travelled through Charleston. This encouraged some black Americans to refer to Sullivan's Island as the Ellis Island (the usual site for the arrival of European immigrants) of black Americans.

During the procession, Morrison explained, "It's never too late to honor the dead.... It's never too late to applaud the living who do them honor ... This is extremely moving to me" (quoted in Lee 2008). The prominent participants in the bench-placing ceremony wore white dresses and carried open yellow parasols as they made their way to commemorate and memorialize those who had arrived at this site before they were taken to the auction block. The day's high humidity and soaring temperatures gave a vivid impression of what it might have been like for the newly arrived who were carried in the hull of a ship and tied to one another during the long journey, filling in what history's facts failed to convey. Organizers poured libations to those who had come before. Morrison, along with Mrs. Tomalin Polite, who recently learned that she was a seventh-generation descendent of one of the enslaved families, cast a wreath of daisies in the water as a sign of respect. A local group of drummers, dressed in African-inspired attire, used their performance to culturally link Africa and the New World. Perhaps these details convey a sense of the ways the ceremony borrowed from many cultural traditions: enslaved Africans did not arrive in white dresses, but the white dresses honored them; "African" libations and "European" wreaths were equally necessary. Such cultural formality made the bench a space for experiencing both collective and individual grief.

In contrast, Fort Moultrie, which towers over the bench' and its small plaque, impresses visitors with its grandeur – the grandeur of the state. It is a site for remembering the nation; and it claims to represent all. The fort's gift shop offers a panoply of multicultural items: souvenirs and books on colonial America, Native Americans and black Americans line the shelves. Yet by representing everyone, no one is allowed to contemplate or mourn. That is the work of the bench outside.[11]

11 For a comparative public memory project, see Wallace (2006).

Much like the area designated for reflection in the National Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, the bench marks a place where historically significant events are not just commemorated but rather affectively remembered by the living. Yet these initiatives are not without their entanglements with the very state that created the conditions for trauma. The US federal government along with community leaders from many minority groups forms articulations that move back and forth between sometimes initially adverse agendas. In seeking public recognition, so-called grassroots efforts form alliances with federal agencies and private corporate donors that enable plans to move forward. It is sometimes possible to evade the state's gaze. The "Lest We Forget" Black Holocaust Museum in Philadelphia, for example, began in someone's home and has since collected materials from black American history and heritage; it has struggled to remain open. In contrast, the new National Museum of African American History and Culture, situated on the National Mall in Washington DC is due for completion by 2015. This institution comes into being with the support of government and private donors. Like the Holocaust Museum, the staffing and maintenance of these museums require adherence to certain guidelines to make them both specific to a group's history and generalizable, so that they become public memory.[12] Memory projects come to life between the state and grassroots community efforts – between the fort and the bench.

Site of memory 3: the plantation tour

I turn now to my last ethnographic example, the commercial memory tour. The vitality of public memory – and its circulation between elites and ordinary people – is signaled by the significance and growing presence of "memory tourism." Much like tourists travelling to Auschwitz and Dachau, there are nowadays more and more visitors at sites of slavery memory. These sites allow the memory tourists to connect with the emotional life of the past. Culture and cultural tourism have become major economic enterprises. Thus, the intersection between memory and commercial circuits is globally important, encouraging further transnational connections.

One site of this growing industry, also in South Carolina, is the plantation tour. Southern plantations remain an important site of mainstream popular memory in

12 Performances such as those aimed towards public recognition at once challenge dominant narratives, yet they also incorporate official tropes. For an extended discussion of the politics of recognition, see Povinelli (2011).

the United States. In recent years, however, a more diverse set of visitors – including more non-white tourists – is taking an interest in these tours. Public memories that have now become broadly circulating encourage visitors to ask tour guides about stories and experiences that had not previously been considered part of the tour, such as what it was like for a child to be a slave. Tour guides often feel committed to inserting their plantation into a story about the pleasures of southern regionalism, and in the past, plantation tours overwhelmingly assumed an Anglo American audience. If enslaved people were discussed, even in the early 1990s, they were referred to in generic terms such as "the help," which erased their actual social status. Enslaved people were merely "the workers."

It is becoming increasingly difficult for plantation tours to ignore contestations about the history of the US South. In the 1990s, for example, an extended battle ensued over the presence of the Confederate flag that – as the state flag – was flown over the South Carolina state capitol building. As the flag of the southern states, popularized during the US Civil War, it continues to connote for many a support for secession and for the institution of slavery and its aftermath. An ongoing point of contention, for those who do not see their alliances with the southern secessionists, is why a symbol that celebrates a regional past should continue to represent the state. Yet, for southerners who feel that the Confederate past *is* their past and find that it is increasingly being erased, an easy compromise is not evident. A tussle over varying versions of history is apparent: should tour guides tell of the vitality of the South, including the Confederacy, or of its terrors in the history of slavery? In such tussles, both versions of history gain force. Southern history has the force of regional and national allies; but slave history has the public force of transnational memory work. Even ordinary interactions between visitors and hosts on the plantation show these struggles in action, stretching concepts of history and memory. Tours, I argue, embody the contradictions between the varied points of insertion into official histories; such contradictions are part of the tourist performance. The 'memory project' of slavery emerges from such contradiction-filled performances.

During the mid-1990s, I first accompanied a group of black students and professors as they spent a week in the Sea Islands in order to learn about the history and culture of the region. One part of the weeklong experience brought us to a plantation that was, at that time, notorious for its attempts to bring back the old South. Images of plantation splendor no doubt filled the typical tourists' minds. That was not the case for this group: age and sentiments could not draw us to be nostalgic about this place. Making our way past the entrance, in the distance, a gate could be seen, behind which a modest colonial house came into view. We were directed to a parking area to the right of the house. A small patch of cotton on the side of the parking lot led a few students to try to see what it was like to

pick. The hot sun further brought home the reality of what it must have been like to have to work in such conditions. Even before our group arrived at the front door of the main house, the students had already started to imagine what it must have been like to have to work in the fields – fields that stretched far beyond where one could see. One student said: "Imagine if all you could see was nothing but a long field of cotton before you and no way out."

After several minutes of waiting, our Anglo-American tour guide arrived at the front door of the mansion, dressed in a hooped skirt, and resembling the central character Scarlett in the famous Margaret Mitchell novel (1936) and subsequent movie (1939), *Gone with the Wind*. We were told a few things about the history of the house itself and its place in the history of the area, but we were also very aware of its fictive life as it circulated in popular films. Once we were led to the main house, our anxieties immediately began to mount over the way that the furniture and renovations done on the house were described in great detail, while little mention was made of the people who were involved in the house's upkeep and maintenance. As we walked from the parlor to the dining room, the tour guide continued to point out details about the furniture, all praise of which was attributed to the owner of the house. Finally, a student pointedly asked, "Where did the slaves stay?" No comment: the tour guide continued with her script. Another student followed up: "Did the owner really put in that ceiling or did the slaves?" Again, no comment. A third student joined in: "Where did the slaves live?"

At first the guide seemed not to hear the questions. The students repeatedly asked, however, trying to interrupt her performance, and their questions proved more insistent than the guide's refusal to answer. Eventually, worn down by this persistence and apparently drawing the obvious conclusion that this group was not interested in the life of a plantation owner but rather in that of the captive laborers, the guide explained that she was not allowed to deviate from her script. At the very end she relented and asked if we had noticed a set of brick structures on the side of the oak-lined road leading to the main house as we drove in. This is where some of the slaves had lived, she said. This area had not been marked in any distinctive way; we had hardly noticed it.

After the house tour finally ended, our group hurriedly went to look on the side of the road and found a pile of rubble from brick buildings that appeared long abandoned. As we wandered around, noting the dirt and damp foundation, some fantasized aloud what it must have been like to live in such small quarters. The area was covered in dense vegetation, and the remains of only a few structures could still be seen. Still, most of us were affected by what we saw; students began to imagine what it must have been like to be enslaved. The ruins, particularly in their unrestored state, brought the past to life. The students were moved; some

stepped inside and stood amidst the deteriorating walls, and thus tried to travel back to the era when their relatives lived.

Already their expectations were different from a generation ago. It is likely that in contexts such as a plantation tour, past black tourists would not have assumed their story to be included. To the post-civil rights generation, however, this exclusion was not acceptable. Their generation is firmly entrenched in the new public sphere, in which they expect to be treated as anyone else.

On a more recent visit, in June 2011, I could see that the cabins of the enslaved, once unidentifiable, had been restored. The main house still stands with antebellum period-attired tour guides poised to greet visitors on the porch, and one is immediately drawn into their performance space through their dress, styles of speech, and comportment. In contrast to my earlier visits, however, during which there was no black American history to comment on other than for its absence, tourists are now encouraged to visit the African American site. There is now an area called Slave Street, where eight cabins stand as markers of the black American history on the plantation. Each cabin tells the story of slavery; tourists progress from slave crafts (with a contemporary basket maker and a display of baskets) to a slave church and a room of artifacts. Then we reach the exhibit's moment of triumph: the election of President Obama! As a coda, the very last cabin is the site of the "Gullah Theater," reserved for a performance in which the audience learns about local Gullah language and culture and is invited to join the performers as they tell folktales in the Gullah tradition.

Clearly, in the time since my earliest visit, great efforts have been made to include the black American experience in the story of the plantation. Of course, what should be included in the account remains a disputed question. Thus, for example, one of the stories that is meant to appease both black and white tourists is the account of the 'task system.' The task system was a labor system in which slaves worked by the task and not the hour. The white tour guide explained: "Slaves didn't have it all that bad; when they finished they could work for themselves." As a more empathetic participant commented: "Who could work for themselves after working fourteen hours a day – especially in the heat and humidity of South Carolina? The fact that these were people in bondage and not in control of their lives seems hard [for some people] to accept."

In the years since my first visit to this and other plantations, the audiences that I have been a part of – whether black American or non-black American tourists – are less and less willing to simply accept the plantation owners' story as the whole story. They want, at the very least, a multi-perspective account. Black Americans expect some commentary on the conditions of the enslaved, including an account of the trauma of slavery. Moreover, visitors also expect to hear about other white experiences – for instance, the experiences of small farmers

who lived without slaves. Visitors are forcing a change in tour guides' practices; the structure of the tour is changing. Performances of difference and refusal are increasingly expected as part of the tour; furthermore, often tour guides preempt such critical commentaries by offering their own official version of slave memory. This change draws directly from the rise of tourism as a lucrative economic venture and from the growing diversity of tourists. It also originates from the push of a public memory project that has crucially been strengthened by its transnational clout and by its resonance with other stories of suffering. This has not only helped slavery to become visible in the public arena, but also to draw the attention of a varied set of constituents.

Conclusion

Transnational dialogues bring memories to life – even if they are mobilized within the more limited contexts of national and regional debates. Intertwined discussions of the Holocaust and the Middle Passage have been formative for US public memory: they have brought us the ability to imagine the horrors of history through the continuing trauma of survivors, as well as a repertoire of communal memory practices with a healing potential. The limitations of some of these practices have been shown here, but also the possibilities they offer for creating new formations of political identity and action.

New publics are formed through their production and consumption of circulating memories, which catch viewers and consumers in unexpected ways, and hence open up possibilities for imagining a public sphere that is inclusive of people and groups who are not used to seeing themselves as active makers of culture. In this way, public memory projects become important sites for moving across and beyond national political spheres. The practices described in this essay involve multiple sources, both official and vernacular. For minority groups in the US, the state has at times played a critical role in generating legislation of inclusion, as is evident in the marking of the National Heritage Corridor along the southeastern coastal region of the United Sates, the Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor. Yet this Corridor also overlaps with the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor. These Corridors are conceived in contradiction. Together they simultaneously host memorialization of slave holding and of slavery's trauma. It is in the interplay between such multiple enactments that public memory projects – and new publics – come into being.

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