

Absence, Revision, and the Other: Rhetorics of South Carolina Antebellum Tourism Sites

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The production of tourism situated within an antebellum history is fraught with tension. Moralities, power conflicts, and identities clash as tourist production based on historical apartheid in the United States proliferates and becomes more popular and profitable. Southern states such as South Carolina are particularly subject to such concerns. As one of the original thirteen colonies, South Carolina was a profitable participant in the plantation system, a system built upon rhetorics of absence, revision, and hatred. These rhetorical constructions effectively created a view of enslaved Africans that “othered” and minimized them and erased their presence, importance, and humanity. The resulting ethnocentrism, racism, and oppression still exists today within the American cultural and political landscapes. South Carolina – also the veteran of major revolts, wars, secessions, and occupations throughout its history—was a slave state for its first two hundred years. During these colonial and antebellum periods, its enslaved primarily black population outnumbered white people by the ratio of four to one (Lockley and Doddington 2012). Today, South Carolina offers a popular tourist vista dotted with homesteads, plantations, parks, battlegrounds, national historic sites, markets, and museums all originating from and documenting our nation’s “peculiar institution” of slavery (Calhoun 1837).

Within this cultural landscape filled with historical reproduction, a visitor might expect to find the presence of blacks—enslaved and free—permeating the presentations, performances, contexts, messages, and documentations of life in the South; such is not always the case. Communication about the experience of slavery varies widely among tourism locales within the state and is often marked more by a rhetoric of erasure, of an absence, than of a participation filled with power, production, and presence. The instances of thoughtful, varied, significant, and historically accurate inclusions of the experience of slavery on and within these historical sites contrast sharply with the absences and inaccuracies that characterize some of the other tourism offerings.

In this critical rhetorical analysis of a series of tourism locales, we present and theorize rhetorics of absence and revision across multiple sites in coastal South Carolina, from Georgetown south to Charleston. Bisected by U.S. 17, this former “King’s Highway” was the only land route serving

the multiple plantations that lined the South Carolina coast between 1750 and 1860, and now winds through not only the most popular and populous seasonal resort areas in South Carolina but also what were once some of the largest, most profitable indigo and rice plantations of the colonial and antebellum periods. Representing the national heritage by-way known as the Gullah-Geechee Corridor, the area is not only a fertile field for the study of plantation life but also is one context for the emergence of the unique African diaspora that developed out of the “Middle Passage” slave experience and still exists today. We suggest that these recurring and revisionist rhetorics of absence are consubstantiated by quiet—and sometimes not so silent—hatreds that serve to further affect emergent discourses today. These are the claims we will analyze and discuss through this research.

1.0 METHOD

This critical, rhetorical analysis—presented as a series of narratives—takes the reader on a tour of some of the tourist production sites along the King’s Highway, which purport to represent the low country plantation experience. While we do not claim that our visits to historic sites in this geographic area were exhaustive, for over two years, we visited, toured, explored, and collected oral, written, photographic, and videotaped field notes during multiple visits to a variety of former settlements, plantations, and historic homes; graveyards, burial sites, and memorials; and museums, heritage locations, and archives. We examined the sites’ historical records, tourism and marketing materials, and other written and visual artifacts. We interviewed local historians and talked with docents, tour guides, volunteers, and interpreters. We identified common themes in our fieldnotes, and then we each constructed individual stories about our experiences. We then analyzed and selected our representative narratives; we present the selected narratives and analyses in this piece.² Within this paper, as we focus on rhetorics of absence and revision, we present our narratives and analyses of Middleton Place and Hampton Plantation, since our experiences at these sites generally represented our experiences across historic homes and plantations. We present our experiences at Rice Museum as a contrast and representation of the more thoughtful inclusions that we documented at some other tourism locales. We note that our experiences at Middleton Place and Hampton Plantation contrasted with rhetorics experienced at some of the other sites that represented more diverse histories/herstories.³

The presentation of histories/herstories was one important consideration in our choice to craft our fieldnotes into personal narratives to present data and introduce analyses. Histories/herstories represent here, in part, a collection of stories about diverse people, experiences, events, and reflec-

tions of a temporally located discourse that recounts and recalls events of the past within the constraints of the presence. Writing about our participation as researchers from the vantage point of hearing the stories told—and not told at and within the historical sites allows us to react to and retain the narratives that comprise the rhetorical text of the historical site. We suggest in this piece that some of those narratives are revised and/or erased to achieve particular representations that consequently create particular perceptions. As a result, we apply Blair's (2001) notion of "parable" in the narrative accounts we present here, with the intent within these stories, to demonstrate the absences, erasures, revisions, and other tensions that we then discuss in our analysis. In our efforts to recreate, embody, and re-story the plantation experience, we toured the homes and wandered the grounds; we walked the fields and knelt on the graves. As an experiential practice, we sought to perform, reform, and transform our tourist experience in order to understand the evolution of the sites themselves. We also sought to identify the agencies and generative and constitutive powers of these rhetorical texts (Blair 2001; Bruner 2005) as they continue to evolve and reproduce, yet remain whole, fixed, and individual (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1991), from plantation to museum to barony. Our ongoing documentation of our experiences at these tourist sites evolved into a documentation of the absences and revisions of specific important standpoints and experiences that remain inherent within these sites. We suggest that these absences constitute a powerful rhetoric that is oppositional to a more thoughtful inclusion of the experiences of those working in bondage on many of these former plantations. These revisions, and our own positionalities as tourists and as scholars, affect and are affected by our own distinct cultural histories, experiences, and perspectives. Thus, in this paper, we juxtapose personal and cultural narratives with critical rhetorical analysis as we illustrate a process that, for us, was both generative and transformative.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Rhetoric of Absence

Many scholars have documented the power of the invisible, the rhetoric of the absent (Bracy 1998; Chidester 2008; Goodwine and The Clarity Press Gullah Project 1998; Holdstein 2011; Jackson 1999; Kly 1998; Landau 2011; Nakayama and Krizek 1995; Scott 1993; Smallwood 2007; West 2001). As Foucault (1972) reminds us, historical discourse constructs knowledge through the power of language, and what is absent from that discourse often constitutes a powerful rhetoric about the dominant culture. As cultures, power structures, and social traditions move and shift, some-

times all that is left are the remnants of voice, a duality of speech and silence, of revelation and concealment (Scott 1993). The lack of speech—silence—is interpreted just as is voice, and silence, like voice, can invoke paternalism, power, subjugation, and marginalization. In some of his work, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Weisel suggests that silence and forgetting become a type of complicity in hate speech and hate crimes (1986, 2006). These rhetorical twists and turns can lead to minimalization, objectification, and the resulting hatreds that ensue from rhetorics of absence.

Communication scholars, particularly, have applied these theoretical underpinnings to the construction of race. Whiteness is one such construct that has been critiqued, and the rhetoric of absence that marks the historical discourse about races other than whites is a construct of white-normativity concealed strategically in communication patterns and interactions (Jackson 1999; Nakayama and Krizek 1995). The English language, ironically, uses the term “blackness” to signify absence. Unknowable space is called a “black hole,” ignorance is often referred to as “being left in the dark.” This nomenclature is especially common in the racial construction of blackness, which is particularly vulnerable to rhetorics of silence and absence (West 2001).

In the United States, a historical understanding of race is intertwined with an understanding of the historical effects of slavery. The absences from and revisions to the documentation of the experiences of the primarily native, enslaved, and subjugated populations of the colonial and antebellum South are especially salient to our argument. For example, the canonical historical record noticeably reframes a series of rebellions by the freedom-seeking enslaved Africans, Caribbean Islanders, and indigenous populations in the South as “Seminole” or “Indian” wars. Historical battlefield reports omitted the words *black*, *Negro*, or *African*; disguised the nature of whom the whites were fighting by referring to the enslaved Africans as “Seminoles” or “Interpreters;” called colonial and American defeats “massacres” instead of “battles;” and referred to free non-white encampments as “maroons running wild” (Kly 1998). Even today, the history curricula in South Carolina public schools omits most mentions of the efforts by the people who were enslaved at resistance, including one of the most important rebellions of enslaved people in colonial history: the Stono Rebellion (Goodwine 1998).⁴

2.2 The Absence of Slaves When Narrating the Slave Experience

The absence and distortion of the voice and experience of the enslaved Africans in some of the historical representation(s) of plantation life is also well documented (Butler, Carter and Dwyer 2008; Creel 1988; Fairbanks

1984; Jackson 2012; Jordan 2005; Marshall 2014; Miles 2008; Montes and Butler 2008; Otto 1980; Porter 2001). Part of this exclusion stems from the fact that enslaved people were often prevented from leaving written records of their own; they were neither typically written about, nor were they “considered worthy of record” (Fairbanks 1984, 1). However, a variety of scholars have found ways to document the resourcefulness and richness of plantation slave culture. As divergent African and Caribbean humans were imported into the British colonies, American states, and finally the Confederacy, and as those people continued, sustained, and adapted their own and others’ varied African and European cultural practices, they developed and “creolized” their formal and informal cultural practices Babson 1990; Bell 2010; Fairbanks 1984; Fennell 2011; Ferguson 1992; Handler 1996; Handler and Corruccini 1983; Mufwene 1998; Russell 1997; Stine Cabak and Groover, 1996; Weik 1997; Wilkie 1997; Young 1996). The resulting and still vibrant Gullah-Geechee culture blends and adapts language and linguistic forms; religious, medical, funeral and spiritual rituals; familial, interpersonal and gender norms; and food production and preparation practices (among others). Some of these blended cultural practices served to resist their abductors and colonizers, while other practices reflected assimilation and identification. The primary critique of the historical record of slavery concerns the hegemonic-representations of the master-enslaved relationship, labor practices, childrearing norms, lineage patterns and lines of succession, and the “limited interpretive options for public presentations of national history” which “in turn influences contemporary discourse on descendants of enslaved Africans, slavery, and plantations” (Jackson 2012, 100). Jackson continues by calling for “scholars to uncover or make visible what has previously been left out or ignored” (30). This is precisely our intent in this paper.

3.0 THE SITES

3.1 Middleton Place

“It’s hot and it’s only 10am,” Jan observes, trying not to whine as she skirts a rectangular reflecting pool overlooking the lush grounds. Large hedges line the path, and Jan seeks out a well-shaded area of the walkway as she shields her eyes from the sun. “I can’t imagine how hot it would be if you had to work outside in the summer, like the enslaved population here did. No wonder the plantation owners would go to Charleston during the summer.”

Her husband, Tim, nodding, shoos a bug. “The mosquitos would be even worse down by the river.”

“Let alone if you are in the river! The enslaved Africans working here spent much of their time digging out cypress stumps, standing in water up to their armpits, while they cleared this land in order to make the rice fields and canals.” Jan shares her increasing knowledge of rice plantations from several months of visiting coastal South Carolina rice plantations for her research.

“I hope this tour tells us more about the history of the rice plantations. Hey, it’s about time to start. Let’s head over there,” Tim nods toward the cabin where they are to meet their tour guide.

They are tourists on a long weekend, a getaway for the busy, white, professional couple. They’re touring Middleton Place, one of the many former rice plantations near Charleston, South Carolina. Located on the Ashley River, Middleton Place is a designated national historic landmark that has remained in the Middleton family for over 320 years. Now managed by a family foundation, it comprises 110 acres that include landscaped gardens; the “Spring House,” a 1746 storage building that was expanded in 1850 for use as a chapel; a rice mill; and a circa 1870 former slave cabin called “Eliza’s House” (South Carolina Plantations 2014). Jan and Tim have chosen a tour called “The African American Focus.”

Standing outside the lone cabin formerly housing enslaved Africans, Jan and Tim meet their guide and docent, Mandy,⁵ a white haired, sixtyish woman originally from Wisconsin who moved to South Carolina three years earlier. Babette, a docent and curator from France, and the only other tour participant that day, waits with them for the tour to start. The morning sun beats down on them, and Jan and Tim peel their wet shirts away from their skin to let in some air as they fan themselves with their brochures and maps. Jan whispers, “I’m not sure I can make the whole hour tour in this heat and humidity.” Tim agrees, but before they can say anything else, the tour begins.

The group obediently follows Mandy into the cabin - a dark, tiny structure smelling of musk and dust. Mandy points out a set of documents hanging on the wall, and Jan is momentarily confused until she realizes that they are hung for the benefit of the tour. She recites, “Sex, age, what is this. . .? Oh, it’s a listing of the Africans who were enslaved!”

“House or field slaves. General condition,” Tim reads verbatim.

“It’s like your portfolio listing!” Jan exclaims.

“Right, like an investment asset sheet,” Tim responds dryly.

Mandy’s presentation sounds scripted. “Slaves were a valuable economic resource for the South,” Mandy reports. “They were like servants, and the plantation owners protected and cared for them. After all, they

were assets, and owners wouldn't mistreat or harm such a profitable commodity. They even got to live in their own little houses," Mandy recites.

"She makes it sound like they were content," Jan whispers to Tim.

"Yeah, like they were autonomous," Tim whispers back.

Back outside in the sticky air after the short tour, Jan exclaims, "This tour was not at all what I expected!"

"Mandy said more about the economic livelihood of the rich white landowners than the 'African American Focus'," Tim agrees.

"I was hoping to hear about the experience of the human beings who were enslaved here, but this was about the experience of the commodity of slaves!" says Jan. She mentally recalls Smallwood's (2007, 35) definition of slaves as "commodities whose most socially relevant feature was their exchangeability."

They continue their tour around the gardens, marveling at the beauty of the terraced landscapes and the river views. Jan reflects on the demonstration of wealth that the plantation's entry road would have displayed. "Those small cabins housing enslaved people would have lined the road, where visitors coming overland could see their wealth. On the other hand, visitors approaching on the river would view the grand plantation manor and the rice fields and their canals. The experiences of the people who were enslaved have been removed from the physical and social landscape of this tour," she remarks. "Besides," she adds, "the African American Focus' is a misnomer anyway. These plantation workers weren't African Americans, because they weren't allowed to become Americans. They weren't citizens. They were enslaved Africans."

"Right," Tim responds. "Mandy doesn't seem to know much about either the experience of enslaved Africans or rice cultivation in South Carolina. I wonder if she has ever toured any other plantations or conducted any of her own historical research in this area."

Jan nods. "I wonder if she's ever spoken with any of the descendants of the people enslaved or read any of their accounts or memoirs of slave life. Has she ever heard the stories of enslaved Africans or read any of the WPA narratives that have been archived?"

The tour ends at the chapel that the plantation owner built for their enslaved workers. Standing in the small wooden building among the pews, Jan glances through the brochure that she picked up at the front entrance and notices that it doesn't mention the African American Focus at all (Middleton Place n.d.).

"Look at this," she points to Tim. "This brochure doesn't mention enslaved people, Africans, or even rice."

"The available tours allow you to experience plantation life (Middleton

Place n.d.),” Tim reads over Jan’s shoulder. “The rich white experience, apparently.”

“This is really one-sided!” Jan exclaims in frustration. “The experience of plantation life on this particular tour day at Middleton Place is only from the plantation owner’s perspective!” She shakes her head.

3.2 Hampton Plantation

Hampton Plantation in McClellanville, South Carolina smells like the river that sustained it. The air is heavy with the oppressive heat and humidity of the Lowcountry, and even though it is early June, leaves crunch underfoot; there are about six inches of dead magnolia leaves blanketing the former plantation grounds. The trees are dripping in silver, lacy Spanish moss, veiled mourners at a hot, silent, Mass. Jan smacks yet another mosquito that has lit on her pale, smooth leg. Despite the multiple applications of sunscreen and DEET in the mostly futile attempts to cover exposed flesh, Deb’s tanned skin is reddening and Cris’ freckled face is flushed as they wave their arms around to shoo off the mosquitoes, now swarming in a vicious mist.

“How could anyone survive this!” exclaims Cris, circling around toward the white plantation house. A two story Georgian home, with the typical sloping porch floors of the time, it was a rice plantation until the Civil War. The property had been in the Horry/Rutledge family since its construction in the 1740s until the family donated it to the state of South Carolina in 1971. It is now a public access state park, state historic site, and a National Historic Landmark (South Carolina’s Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism 2009; South Carolina State Parks 2012).

Deb wanders over to a huge oak tree that has a plaque in front of it. “There’s a great view of that tree from here,” remarks Jan from the front porch.

“George Washington saved this oak tree when he visited Hampton Plantation as part of his presidential tour after the Revolutionary War.” Deb reads the plaque out loud. “Shall we go around the back?” They start down a path overgrown with yellow and white honeysuckle and orange trumpet vine. On the right is a flat marker with a long inscription on it for John Henry Rutledge:

Son of Frederick and Harriott Horry Rutledge who departed this life on the 5th of March 1830 aged 21 years- he was distinguished for fortitude and firmness- the goodness and the magnanimity that he showed even in the agonies of painful death made an indelible impression upon all who witnessed it. He died in peace with all men and on the full confidence that his maker would receive his soul with that mercy and forgiveness

who is the hope and solace of the penitent in his approach to the throne of the eternal.

Cris, Deb and Jan wander farther down the path and discover another plaque with a poem by Archibald Rutledge, the most recent private owner and a former poet laureate of the state of South Carolina.

“All the things I expected to see aren’t here,” murmurs Deb, as they read and transcribe the plaques.

“Like graveyards holding the remains of enslaved people?” suggests Cris.

“Like any evidence of slavery whatsoever?” adds Jan.

“Yes, exactly!” exclaims Deb. “I thought there’d be some refuse piles, old graves, maybe remnants of homes of formerly enslaved people, historical reconstructions, but I guess all that would be decomposed after all these years. Why wouldn’t they construct some commemoration, try to tell some story?”

“You’d at least think there’d be a plaque like these. . .” Cris motions toward the Rutledge family plaques. “There’s not one mention or image of enslaved people on these grounds – not one plaque, not one marker! The TREE got more recognition than the people who built, maintained, and sustained this place!”

Jan opens the brochure she picked up at the front gate (South Carolina’s Hampton Plantation 2009). “Even the brochure only mentions the descendants of the enslaved; there’s nothing about the enslaved people who lived and died here.”

The women head over to Sam Hill Cemetery, one of the places on the property where the enslaved Africans were buried and where some of their descendants still bury their dead today. At #17, Sam Hill Cemetery, there are pockets of graves marked with surprisingly new silk flowers. “Of course,” remarks Jan. “Monday was Memorial Day.”⁶

The three researchers begin wandering around the overgrown, sandy area. The mosquitoes are still buzzing. Newer gravestones look really old, primarily because they haven’t been maintained; there are no old grave stones here. The recorded deaths are all from the 1970s forward. The graves are clustered in twos, threes, sometimes fives. There are no manicured lawns or fresh flowers. There are no fenced graveyards or beautifully etched memorials. There are no marble tombstones; no artful poetry engraved near pretty little benches. The area is cluttered with garbage – rusted beer cans, faded silk flowers, used condoms. Deb begins making a list of all the striking absences, all the failures of remembrance, all the differences from the gated and landscaped Rutledge cemeteries.

The burial patches spread out over about an acre. Many graves are marked only with a small, rusted marker – about the size of a business card or luggage tag - with the person’s name and years of birth and death. Like rusty place cards, the markers stick up about six to eight inches from the grave. In time, the forest foliage and the sand will cover them up. Other graves have homemade wooden crosses. One such cross has been tied together with a pink bow.

When graves do display stones, they are often half buried in the woods, peeking out of the sand. Discarded plastic flowers are piled up at the edges of the clearings where the graves are clustered. There is another clearing with more graves, and more mosquitoes, farther back in woods.

“Had enough?” Jan asks, wiping her face and adjusting her headband. Cris and Deb quickly agree.

Deb scratches her leg and frowns. “We came to find evidence of a particular human population. They were kidnapped from their homes, brought here against their will, and sold to the owners of this plantation to live, work, and die. They were here for centuries! Where’s the evidence?”

“I never considered we might not find anything at all,” Cris sighs.

3.3 *The Rice Museum*

Cris, Deb, and Jan slip into the Rice Museum, which seeks to chronicle “the history of a society dependent on the rice crop” (Rice Museum 2014) and its impact regionally and globally. Located in Georgetown, the third oldest town in South Carolina and a major rice port during the 19th century, it is housed in the “Old Market Building,” a structure built circa 1832-1835, whose multiple governmental and commercial purposes included a slave market (South Carolina Department of Archives and History 2014). In 1840, half the rice in the world came from South Carolina; by 1850, Georgetown exported more rice than anywhere else in the world (Rice Museum 2012).

“Phew! What a relief!” Jan smiles broadly as she walks into the air-conditioned museum.

“Finally, a break from the heat and humidity!” agrees Cris.

“How did people live here before the invention of air conditioning?” Jan asks aloud as they crowd into the tiny museum shop to purchase tour tickets.

Annie,⁷ an incoming History major at a nearby university, is the docent on duty.

“I’m a present day member of the Gullah community,” she tells us, smiling broadly, “a descendant of the former slaves who still live and work

in the area. My mother, a sweet-grass basket weaver, and my auntie, a painter, have passed down generations of stories to me.” Her upbringing and training are evident in her knowledge.

“There were over 50 rice plantations in the ‘Garden of Gold,’ the nickname at the time for the area,” she reports. “Slaves worked in water shoulder deep. The greatest causes of death were from alligator attacks, snake-bites, and their related infections.”

Deb is busy reading a large display – a collection of narratives of enslaved people, collected during the WPA ‘Slave Narratives’ projects. In one, when asked by the interviewer what the elderly did when they became too old to work the fields, one little boy’s response was, “There are no old people ‘round here” (Rice Museum 2012). Deb gazes at the little boy’s face and moves to an excerpt from one of the diaries of an “owner” of enslaved people. “Bristol reports that two of the slave women are confined and expected to give birth at any time,” she reads. “With the ban on the import of slaves from Africa, we need to ensure healthy children from the slaves we have” (Rice Museum 2012). Her reverie is interrupted by one of Annie’s stories.

“Despite the bleak living conditions, the slaves did have some sources of personal power. Slaves who were midwives, for example, could barter for good will garnered from successfully delivering the babies of their owners. For each healthy baby delivered, the midwife would present the plantation mistress with a shell that the mistress wore on her skirt. The shells designated the number of the babies that could be saved from the auction block.”

Deb fights back hot tears at the thought of the clunking shells on the mistresses’ skirts, keeping count of children to barter.

“Some plantation mistresses flaunted the law and taught the people who were enslaved to read and write, but mostly wet nurses and nannies educated African children by memorizing their white charges’ lessons and then passing them on to the black children,” continues Annie. “Most slaves often worked double duty, tending their own gardens when their chores were complete, trading and bartering that produce among themselves and to other plantations. Many of the nannies snuck tea biscuits back to the African children to try to keep them strong.”

“I never knew that,” breathes Deb.

Cris listens to Annie describe the harsh living conditions and imagines what it must have been like to turn virgin cypress swamp land into rice fields. The enslaved workers were essential labor producers, providing a large stable workforce. Rice cultivation in South Carolina could not have occurred without the manual labor, knowledge, and experience of the peo-

ple who were enslaved. Because of the muddy, sandy soil, and the high water table, rice cultivation machinery could not be used in the Lowcountry's former swampland. Africans from Ghana, Senegal, and other parts of western Africa were specifically targeted because of their knowledge of rice production. They were skilled and experienced commodities, and their skills extended beyond agriculture. They were weavers and woodworkers, wet nurses and washing women. They bartered and traded those skills as well. They had high tolerances— and effective treatments—for mosquito borne illnesses such as malaria and yellow fever. In short, they were survivors. Cris shudders as she remembers the clouds of mosquitoes omnipresent at Hampton Plantation.

Jan examines an exhibit of some of the plantation houses in the area. She's struck by the discussion of Georgian influence in design and architecture and remembers the gardens at Middleton Plantation and the sloping porches of Hampton Plantation. Residences, barns, outbuildings, and gardens— all set in straight lines or at right angles—emulated the country homes of the British elite of the time. Neat and orderly, these “slave rows,” and the plantation buildings they led to, reflected a desire for order.

Cris joins Jan. “I cannot imagine living here in the 1800s, certainly not as a field worker.”

“I know!” responds Jan. She scratches at the mosquito bites on her face. “You had to be tough to survive the summers here.”

“Tough to survive at all,” agrees Cris. Deb joins them as they begin making their way out of the museum. “Did y'all know all this?” she asks.

“I knew the Africans had a resistance to malaria,” replies Jan.

“I had no idea!” exclaims Deb. “I was raised in the South, and spent most of my history classes learning about plantation life and the Civil War, and I was never taught any of this!” She shakes her head. “It's amazing to me that you can think you know something all your life, and then find out how little you really know about it after all.”

“Well, and think of the differences in representations!” observes Cris. “At Hampton Plantation, there was hardly a whisper of the experience of enslaved Africans. Here, we learn about this vibrant powerful culture. . .”

“Same at Middleton!” interrupts Jan excitedly. “Very different representations of experiences!”

“We need to write about this,” they agree, as they walk into the thick, porous, summertime heat.

4.0 DISCUSSION

Taking a break from fieldwork, Jan, Cris, and Deb go to lunch at an

upscale bistro at Pawley's Island Shops, a collection of stores that were built as a tourist destination on the site of a former plantation. Sitting in an air conditioned alcove, in a building renovated from former homes of enslaved people that were dismantled and rebuilt on the property, the three women sip iced tea and chilled wine. They're quiet as they reflect on the irony of eating a nice lunch on top of the bones of the dead enslaved Africans and recognize that, in many ways, they are sitting on top of killing fields.

"South Carolina's tourist economy is still dependent on the legacy of the former enslaved population," Deb observes.

"Absent or present, represented or misrepresented, they're all around us," Cris agrees. "Their stories might not be included within the dominant narratives that are being told by tour guides at some of these historical sites, but they're as compelling and inspiring as the stories of the white people that came to this place."

"They built so many of this nation's iconic structures, created and maintained a vibrant economy, survived while enduring inhuman bondage and violence. . .it's ironic, isn't it, that enslaved Africans were the one group without whom this economy would fall apart?" Deb reflects.

"Yes, and think about it," says Cris thoughtfully. "The same types of verbal and nonverbal constructions that allowed the enslavement trade to flourish and normalize at the time are still in place at many of these tourist sites today. There is no acknowledgement of either these people's humanity or contribution at many of the places we've been visiting. There is no remembrance, no memory, no story being told. To deny people their story is to deny their worth" (Smallwood 2007).

"On the southern plantations, the people who were enslaved lived separate from the plantation owners. They were taught to be deferent, acquiescent, invisible. Even after the war, the resulting reconstruction and segregation periods in the American south reified these cultural norms and behaviors. 'Separate but equal' often meant that as a young white child, I would rarely see people of color except as service providers – maids, janitors, babysitters. This forced absence from a cultural landscape allows us to assume that people of color are different, are less than, are other." Deb's voice cracks with emotion. She clears her throat and takes a sip of her drink.

"And think about all of the tourist sites we've visited," Jan responds. "We've seen so many different types of representations: places where slavery was not represented at all, places where slavery was mis-represented, and places where slavery seemed adequately, or even richly, represented. These differences in levels and types of representations also have a rhetori-

cal power. When you hear about the resourcefulness of people, like we did at the Rice Museum, you start really noticing the absences, the misrepresentations, the way some tellers of these histories produce a view that is extremely one-sided and invokes a sort of white nostalgia for white southern gentility. “

Deb nods. “Especially at the sites that are former plantations! Some sites only represent one particular racial or ethnic experience, some sites include demonstrations of slavery, and other sites represent historical occurrences. Some of the differences in tour and museum experiences seemed based on the particular docent and other human interactions and interpretations within those ‘tour’ moments. Other researchers have noticed this as well” (Bruner 2005; Iles 2006; Pezzulo 2003).

“I wonder how different our ‘African American Experience’ tour would have been if we’d had a tour guide other than Mandy,” remarks Jan.

“Yeah, and how different our experience at the Rice Museum might have been if we didn’t have Annie,” agrees Deb.

“Some of the differences in representation and experience seem to be related to whether the material is mediated, written, or oral,” adds Cris. “Some of them seem to be related to the type of site—plantation, park, battleground, national historic site, market, or museum, and how those purposes blend and blur. I’ve read this in other literature also” (Aden 2012; Iles 2006; Pezzulo 2003; Wallace 1981).

“It seems to matter who owns the site—the state, a private historical society, nonprofit, or the family of the original land grant owner,” Deb says with a chuckle. “The sites managed by family foundations seemed reluctant to even mention their ancestors’ role in slavery.”

“The state would want to sanitize that representation as well,” agrees Cris. “We need to acknowledge different representations for different purposes—most sites seek to tell a particular story, whether that story is familial and intergenerational. . .”

“Or historic or cultural. . .” Deb interrupts.

“Yes, and we need to acknowledge that not only are these fluid performances because of purpose, but they’re also shifting because of differing contexts, presentations, and interpretations,” observes Jan.

“Yet,” adds Cris, “all of these sites are positioning cultural production as tourism.

All of these constructions represent production of capital—past and present—and are therefore, in effect, performances of capitalism and commodification.”

“And hatred,” Deb inserts. “Absences are rhetorical holes—vacuums—and they’re going to get filled with something. In the absence of rich

and diverse understandings and human complexities, ignorance and fear can emerge to fill those vacuums.”

“So which is worse,” asks Jan, “rhetorics of absence, rhetorics of revision, or rhetorics of hate?”

Cris sighs and gazes outside through the thick old window pane glass warping her view of the bustling highway outside. “It’s this road,” she murmurs. “One leads to the other. They’re all the same path that lead to the same destination. Distaste, disgust, and hatred.” She sighs again. “And fear of each other.”

5.0 ANALYSIS

Following Pollock’s (1998, 13) contention that there are “no true representations,” for “representations. . . make absent the very thing it wishes to make present” (17), we suggest that the multiple representations of the experience of enslaved Africans we encountered create a mosaic performance of incomplete and absent representations of slavery. Authentic reproductions are oxymorons. They cannot exist, and when we attempt to represent an experience the result is what Jackson (1998, 280-284) characterizes as “the inauthentic authentic.” The quest for authenticity is a discursive struggle over labels, interpretations, agencies, and values (Abbink 2000; Bruner 2005). In other words, as Shaffer (2004, 154) asserts, “authenticity must be viewed as a socially constructed concept.” Even experience, once reproduced, fails to be authentic anymore. While we understand authenticity to be a false construct, to note the complete absence of stories chronicling millions⁸ of enslaved Africans over a period of time spanning centuries, in places that are state or national historic sites, was and is incomprehensible to us. We suggest that such rhetorical absences allow many visitors to make assumptions about the experiences of the enslaved people in South Carolina and that these assumptions also are often devoid of agency, power, and narrative reasoning. These assumptions can translate into beliefs about their descendants.

All of the tourist sites we visited represent the experience of slavery on a Southern rice plantation quite differently. Some sites seek historical reproduction, some sites seek economic and/or capitalistic reproduction, some sites seek paternal and/or familial reproduction, and some sites seek intellectual and/or scholarly reproduction. In South Carolina, for example, we would suggest that the Rice Museum is a historical reproduction, perhaps allowing for a more balanced view, including narratives and perspectives from both enslaved Africans and whites. Like Middleton Place, the Rice Museum serves as a site of economic production: charging a fee to enter, selling items at a gift shop, sponsoring ticketed events. However,

unlike the Rice Museum, Middleton Place, and Hampton Plantation are paternal and/or familial reproductions as well as historical reproductions. They seek to communicate a multi-generational family legacy that is often built upon and therefore devoid of the experience of the “other.” All of these spaces now function as tourist sites, and as such are all now economic and capitalistic reproductions. These diverse purposes are not bounded; they often overlap, blur, and blend. One common thread shared by the sites we discuss in this paper is that they have now become “places of public memory” or “cultural heritage sites” (Aden 2012; Chambers 2006; Kammen 1991; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991; McKercher and duCross 2002), and therefore, are now all cultural reproductions as well as familial, economic and capitalistic productions.

Cultural heritage sites are not just cultural, familial, economic, and capitalistic productions, however. They not only seek to represent some “history” important to our culture, but they also serve as gatekeepers. The information shared or not shared, the objects for purchase and those unstocked, the words and demeanors of the tour guides and docents—this production becomes a part of a story that the consumers craft, tell, and re-tell. Our experiences at various locales in South Carolina were enhanced or diminished because of the interactions with those who were telling the stories of these places. From Mandy at Middleton Place to Annie at the Rice Museum, our knowledge, histories, and herstories were affected by the narration of the tour guide, docent, or host. Even at the graveyards we visited in Charleston, which are not considered in this particular paper, our information was augmented and our experiences were enriched because of the time spent listening to the tales of the proud Gullah descendant, now self-identifying as a “proud African American veteran,” who managed the groundskeeping crew at St. Michael’s Cemetery since the 1980s; to the gossip shared by the primarily white, upper-middle class female volunteers at the parish gift shop who had been congregation members all their lives; to the stories behind the acquisition of items for the Rice Museum, told vividly by the two white male gift shop managers, marital and business partners for decades; and to the interviews with one of the local men, a black pastor, who narrated the WPA presentation there. We lunched with the interpreter at Hobcaw Barony at the same restaurant that we lunched at together after conducting fieldwork all day. Our experiences—and our knowledge—as tourists, scholars, and citizens of America were heightened by these conversations.

These are contested spaces. Multiple stories exist in these places. These are conversations that civic groups and civic planners; museum foundations and stakeholders; politicians and religious leaders; and constituents representing diverse standpoints continue to have. We are not the first

scholars to study, document, and struggle to understand the motives and meanings, differences and preferences with regard to interpretations at cultural heritage sites (Aden 2012; Bird 2002; Butler, Carter and Dwyer 2008; Carter, Butler and Dwyer 2011; Iles 2006; Key 2012; Miller 2014; Montes and Butler 2008; Wallace 1981). These are not new tensions. But these tensions often mirror disputes occurring in our “culture writ large,” as we struggle with representation in all facets of our cultural milieu, including those of the historical as well as the modern. We suggest that a deeper understanding of the histories within these physical and discursive spaces not only make for interesting leisure but also make for much more common cultural co-habitants. We are neither naïve nor do we suggest that richer representations of our cultural diversity will eliminate racisms and hatreds, but we do insist that to approach understandings of difference is to approach understandings of our human commonalities. Such was the hope of desegregation in the American South during the second half of the twentieth century. We believe, even with all of our existing challenges, that there have been few social experiments in the United States as successful as desegregation, despite the disenfranchisements still existing in our country, and especially our “souths,” with regard to race and class, sexual identity and performance, and a host of other standpoints that color our worlds.

Katriel (1993, 69) contends that “our future is where our past is.” If we learn who we are through learning who we were, then who are we if the knowledge of our past is built on a rhetoric of absence? Who are we, then, as descendants of enslaved Africans? Who are we, then, as descendants of the white owners of enslaved Africans? Who are we, then, as tourists and consumers, historians, and ethnographers? We assert that it is impossible to begin to understand our history if segments of it are made invisible to us, especially as a nation of immigrants who share one commonality—most of us arrived here as travelers. Most of us came here from somewhere else, whether by choice or not. Especially now, when some national political candidates prepare for election to public office by reviling those who have come here as immigrants—especially if they are non-white—we suggest that these glaring absences in our histories, in our narratives, in our cultural presentation(s), help make possible the rhetoric that seeks to divide rather than unite us today.

Registry as a National Historic Site neither does nor should substitute for historical diversity. Likewise, narratives told only from the perspective of military victors are equally limited in scope, understanding and appeal. There are several ways to diversify and represent cultural and historical narratives that are rich, inclusive, and historically varied without sacrificing a pleasurable tourist experience. For example, the displays at Charlestowne Landing National Historic Site are from multiple perspectives representing

an array of religions, ethnicities, nationalities, and histories. These displays often consisted of diary, journal, and receipt book excerpts that include opportunities for visitors to manipulate by, for example, rummaging through chests of clothing to choose particular outfits for the author(s) of the records or to set the table according to the customs discussed in the record or to choose your standpoints to see what your social, familial, and work experiences would be like depending on your race, class, and sex. Prior to groundbreaking, archeologists conducted digs to locate original structures, wells, and graveyards, and those finds are destinations on the walking tour. Items for purchase in the gift shop reflect the diversity of these stories told and lived.

Alternative forms of historical representation include art, music, poetry—even absence—within the presence. At the Tamastlikt Cultural Institute in Oregon, which we have not visited as part of our research, the history of a native people is vividly represented. Struggling to adequately communicate the loss of the tribe's horses in national government round-ups, as well as the tribe members' unspeakable horror when they realized their beloved equine family members had been slaughtered and sold as canned meat, one of the final displays in the institute is a silent telling of that story. In the middle of the largely empty room is a tall pile of empty dogfood cans. Just empty dogfood cans, and an explanation plaque telling the story, are the only things necessary to communicate a cultural loss so profound to its members that no words can express it (Miller 2015).⁹

Similarly, arts and literature can represent diversities and express these complexities in ways that sometimes the historical representation cannot. Multiple artists and writers have evocatively addressed these tensions for centuries.¹⁰ The work of poet laureate of the United States, Natasha Trethewey, addresses the creolization of American culture from an intensely personal perspective as a biracial citizen struggling to reconcile the histories that construct her physical, cultural, familial, and emotional identities (2002, 2006, 2012). Similarly, artist Jonathan Greene depicts his life within the Gullah culture of the South Carolina low country in his colorful drawings and paintings. These are only two such examples of many of the ways in which the artistic community can communicate a vibrant and varied history for public consumption.

The academy has a role to play in this expansion of our historical record as well. We hope to respond to the absences we have documented at tourist sites in South Carolina through this work, but there are many other examples of such scholarship that adds depth and breadth to our oftentimes conflicting accounts of our history. Such is the case in Miles' (2015) accounting of her tour experiences at the Sorrel-Weed House in Savannah, Georgia. Her deconstruction of the "ghost tour(s)" conducted at the home

in question the taken for granted racial tropes present in the narrative of the tour. Additionally, her work (2008) investigating the quest for native personhood by “Nancy, a Cherokee woman,” tells a story of determination, agency, and ultimate victory (through her grandson) in seeking freedom as a native person. We also find Norm Denzin’s (2008, 2011, 2013) performative critiques of the historical depictions of race in popular culture helpful in understanding the diverse constituencies and rhetorical tropes at play within these cultural performances. There are many such stories being told today.

These examples of oppositional dialogue, autobiographical insertions, counter-hegemonic narratives and performances, and fieldwork designed to generate dialogue can replace the absences often imposed by the master narratives that comprise the written history (Abbink 2000; Carter Butler and Dwyer 2011; Butler Carter and Dwyer 2008; Denzin 2013; Katriel 1993; Miller 2005; Montes and Butler 2008). By adding these counter narratives to the master trope presented at these sites, we replace absence –not with distortion, distaste, or outright hatred—but with agency, diversity, and equality in perspective. Historical representation gives us a space within which to insert these importances, to reclaim herstories and histories in order to better understand culture (Pezzulo 2003). These understandings foster dialogue, and these are two important necessities for the dissipation of hate.

6.0 CONCLUSION

In this critical rhetorical analysis of coastal South Carolina tourism locales, we note a rhetoric of absence, revision, and a resulting vilification in which the representation of formerly enslaved Africans and now free African Americans has been minimized, erased, and divested of value. Within the commodification of history, the atrocities of racism, kidnapping, capture, murder, torture, neglect, hatred, and marginalization are whitewashed. Stories of agency and resistance are infrequent. Sites of backbreaking manual labor under the watchful eyes of armed guards have become air conditioned restaurants with African-American waiters working for tips. Places of anguish and grief have become walking tours through romanticized fairy tales about plantation life, invoking hoop skirted beauties and romantic carriage rides. Fields of death and mourning have become parking lots. We cannot change the past, but with a more balanced account of the history of those who were enslaved and those who enslaved, and by critiquing their depictions at similar historical sites, perhaps we can change not only those representations but some of the resulting interpretations that follow. We study cultural heritage sites as rhetorical texts, as ideological

and performative arenas, as places where stories (not History) are reconstructed, performed, promoted, and constantly revised. As Pollock (1998, 27) beautifully suggests, it is

at these moments of slippage, history shape shifts. It appears in a variety of forms: as an armed absence, as motility within the apparently fixed terms of the sign, as ideological panic and conflict, as the very stuff of cultural production, as utopic possibility, and as an excess or overflow. . .like bursting seams, these moments invite and require intervention. They avail history through culture of change – and position the historical subject as a historical agent capable of initiating change.

Thus, the absent is made present.

NOTES

1. Dr. Deborah Cunningham Breede is an associate professor in communication studies at Coastal Carolina University, where she is affiliated with Women and Gender Studies and the Center for Archeology and Anthropology. Her writing has appeared in *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, and *Qualitative Communication Research*. Dr. Christine S. Davis is professor of communication studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She is the author, most recently, of *Communicating Hope: An Ethnography of a Children's Mental Health Care Team* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013) and *Conversations about Qualitative Communication Scholarship: Behind the Scenes with Leading Scholars* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press). Dr. Jan Warren-Findlow is associate professor of Public Health Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her scholarship has most recently been published in *Southern Medical Journal*, *Journal of Human Lactation*, and *Journal of Healthcare for the Poor and Underserved*.

2. In Charleston, we visited Charlestown Landing State Park; The Charleston Slave Market; St. Michael's cemetery; the Fireproof Building, the location of the South Carolina Historical Society; and Middleton Place plantation. Up 17 north in McClellanville, we visited Hampton and Hopeswee plantations. Finally, in Georgetown, we toured the Rice Museum and embarked upon a variety of tourism and research options at Hobcaw Barony.

3. In addition to the Rice Museum in Georgetown, for more inclusive representations of the contributions of diverse populations, we strongly recommend visiting Charlestowne Landing Historic Site or Drayton Hall in the Charleston area and Freewoods Farm in the Georgetown area.

4. For more about the lives of people of color in the colonial and antebellum periods of the American South, we suggest readers turn to Leland Ferguson's *Uncommon Ground: Archeology and Early African America, 1650-1800*; Goodwine's and the Clarity Press Gullah Project's *Legacy of Ibo Landing: Gullah Roots of African American Culture*; Joyner's *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community*; and *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina* by Peter H. Wood.

5. "Mandy" is a pseudonym.

6. For another treatment of these narratives, see Davis and Breede (2015).

7. "Annie" is a pseudonym.

8. Most scholars agree that the TransAtlantic Database is the most comprehensive source for information regarding what is commonly known as the "Mid Atlantic" slave trade or the "Middle Passage." While they acknowledge all calculations are estimates, they have documented 36,000 slaving voyages carrying as many as 10 million enslaved Africans to the "Americas" over a period of three centuries, with over 305,000 of them landing in the colonial or United States.

9. Monticello and Washington's Birthplace in Virginia, the Hezekiah Alexander and Bennett homesites in North Carolina, and the Vann and Ridge Houses in Georgia are examples of historic sites that tell multi-racial, multi-conceptual stories of events, people, and places. There are many others.

10. These works are too exhaustive to list here, but that of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. duBois, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, Alice Walker, Alex Haley, Basquiat, are just a few that immediately come to mind.

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