

# Slavery Heritage Representations, Cultural Citizenship, and Judicial Politics in America

Christine N. Buzinde and Iyunolu F. Osagie

Former slave plantations that are currently heritage sites or plantation museums in America have been criticized for their frequent use of non-inclusive representational strategies. Such strategies usually annihilate, trivialize, or marginalize the contributions of African Americans to these heritage sites and rarely include them in their master narratives. This paper argues that the dominant racial sentiments of the slave past still have lingering effects on how plantation museums perceive minority groups today and that the notions of citizenship they portray are implicated in the cultural resonances emanating from that past. Using some key judicial rulings on the status of African Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this paper critiques the cultural contestations of citizenship evident in the visual and semiotic packaging of plantation tourism. Cultural citizenship studies offers tools to help us understand the link between plantation museum narratives and judicial legacies of race in America.

This paper utilizes cultural citizenship debates to argue that American plantation heritage narratives today are rooted in the iconic memories of race that were largely legitimized by the judicial rulings in a number of key Supreme Court cases. Discourses on cultural citizenship help us frame our understanding of the past; and race-based judicial cases provide an explanatory model for the dominant society's resistance to the political rights of marginalized groups. Since such legal cases are a metonymic representation of the will of the majority, they, in a way, expose the mind of the dominant society. Also the link between the patterns of representation evident within many slave-related heritage sites and the discursive impact of judicial rulings highlight the importance of cultural citizenship studies to any discussion of the racial politics of plantation museums.

## A cultural citizenship perspective

Today's global village increasingly deals with issues of citizenship and culture, particularly as they apply to groups at the margins of society.

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Christine Buzinde is Assistant Professor in the Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management at Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania. Iyunolu Osagie is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Pennsylvania State University. *Historical Geography* Volume 39 (2011): 41-64. ©2011, Historical Geography Specialty Group, Association of American Geographers.

Scholarly debates on the notion of citizenship have focused on issues such as: the implications of democracy in Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe; the increase of ethnic and national variance within the European Union; disputes over welfare privileges in the United States; and increasing migration to developed nations. By the late twentieth century scholars of both cultural studies and citizenship studies saw pertinence in debating issues of culture and citizenship as one piece. The term culture in cultural studies implies a set of practices with aesthetic resonance, perpetuating a set of meanings in both private and public institutions.<sup>1</sup> It implies a set of traditions constitutive of a group's identity.<sup>2</sup> Citizenship, in citizenship studies, connotes rights, belonging, membership<sup>3</sup>—ideas of inclusion that are backed by a clear sign (and sometimes vague sense) of legal privilege. Over time, these focused definitions in the two disciplines seem to be inadequate to explain the rapidly changing and complex structures of everyday life. The structured imbrications and contestations between the two fields of studies provide an avenue through which scholars in both fields can reexamine their respective discourses. For example, when looked at closely, both terms, to varying degrees, are discourses of inclusion and exclusion, albeit through different routes. These structural persuasions, among other things, offer grounds on which to debate the linkages between culture and citizenship. As Stevenson notes, culture, as "a key site of contestation" in modernity, "forcefully brings questions of citizenship to the fore."<sup>4</sup>

As one result of the globalizing acts of social actors and groups, cultural consensus,<sup>5</sup> or the idea of a singular, cohesive, and insular cultural identity, is neither workable nor desirable. Given the circulation of goods and people in this cosmopolitan era, it has become more acceptable and economically viable for diverse cultures and citizens to communicate and interact. Renato Rosaldo articulates this inter-connectedness when he calls for the need to maintain one's cultural difference without sacrificing one's right to full membership in a democratic society.<sup>6</sup> The study of cultural citizenship focuses on the quality of the individual's membership in society. It explores issues such as freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. This view of citizenship that deals with the intersection of cultural markers and the legal ramifications of citizenship has been identified as cultural citizenship.<sup>7</sup> In other words, cultural citizenship highlights the link between "one's identity (race, class, gender, language, nationality) and the non-legal aspects of one's citizenship," such as "access to resources, involvement in the labor force, participation in public discourse, relationship to the environment, education,"<sup>8</sup> and the right to be included in a national heritage portrait.

As Stevenson notes of this positioning, a "cultural citizen is a polyglot who is able to move comfortably within multiple and diverse communities."<sup>9</sup> This polyglot figure is of interest to scholars who see the

increasing cosmopolitan environment as a key way to understand the inequitable parameters of culture and the heterogeneity of cultural expectations.<sup>10</sup> One's flexibility, or "social mobility," for want of a better term, is a necessary response to the economic movement of goods and services on a global scale. The geographic and historical complexities of the marketplace, Urry explains, has helped to shape the cosmopolitan openness of the cultural citizen.<sup>11</sup> Cultural citizenship studies articulates the legal rights and socio-economic temper of the cultural citizen as diversified in its representation.<sup>12</sup> Thus cultural citizenship is an unequivocal call for unreserved inclusion in the dominant social community.<sup>13</sup>

As a theoretical concept, cultural citizenship has generally been adopted to interrogate socio-cultural identity, political will, and cultural creation. Cultural citizenship enables scholars to analyze and link issues of belonging, rights, and responsibilities to questions of cultural power.<sup>14</sup> In any case, culture, or, as Mitchell would say, the idea of culture is better understood in its internal workings as power.<sup>15</sup> Thus, conversations on cultural citizenship often focus on struggles over the politics of naming, the right to vote and participate in civil society, and the practices of silencing, subordinating, and annihilating marginalized identities. Cultural citizenship studies is mostly concerned with the symbolic aspects of a society, such as whose history is taught in schools or represented within national heritage sites. In this sense, cultural citizenship addresses issues of marginalization but also deconstructs the normalization of societal practices enacted by the dominant society,<sup>16</sup> what Blomley calls a pre-political enactment.<sup>17</sup> In identifying the link between space and the law, Blomley criticizes scholars who map "space" and "law" as innocent in their representation, thus disguising their privileging of power.<sup>18</sup> Methodologically, research on cultural citizenship concerns is often conducted from the viewpoint of marginalized groups so as to comprehend their aspirations and worldviews. This research methodology is two-pronged in that it debunks dominant ideologies of citizenship while critically interrogating spaces of inequality that plague society. Cultural citizenship is, in essence, a debate about how social beings can engage their communities. For example, cultural citizenship is rearticulated within various societal institutions, such as museums.

## **Plantation museums and the politics of slavery heritage**

As cultural artifacts, museums serve a fundamental purpose in society in terms of narrating a community's history and endowing it with meaning. Through the discursive politics of inclusion and exclusion, museums draw on selective symbolic cues to perform cultural citizenship. Consequently, what "museums present as the community's history, beliefs, and identity may represent only the interests and self-image of certain

powers within the community.”<sup>19</sup> Matters are further complicated when the displayed narrative is linked to a contentious past, such as slavery, which in its very nature is based on principles of exclusion and domination. A number of slave plantation museums in the southeastern United States or American South (henceforth referred to as plantation museums) form part of the nation’s heritage tourism industry. Indeed the American South has witnessed an increase in the number of plantation museums as well as tourism traffic within these sites. Rearticulated as heritage products, former plantations (on which the enslaved and enslavers once resided and where the genesis of chattel bondage and racial oppression took place in America) are now rightfully designated as important mnemonic sites. Under the auspices of national/regional cultural heritage, former slave plantations have, in fact, come to dominate public toured spaces in the American South of the twenty-first century.<sup>20</sup> These sites have been converted into beguiling cultural heritage infrastructures, resulting in what is termed “plantation tourism.”

Plantation museums are replete with representational incongruities and discrepancies and can be conceptualized as dissonant forms of cultural heritage.<sup>21</sup> Dissonance is a result of socially constructed master narratives that shape the past into cleansed national legacies.<sup>22</sup> Given that slavery is one of the most unsettling chapters in the nation’s history, such constructions are often underpinned by articulations of collective memory that are negotiated in contemporary politics of race. The end result is a social engineering that celebrates dominant value systems while marginalizing subaltern histories.

Extant research has been instrumental in illustrating the various forms of dissonance evident within plantation representations. These studies reveal that terms such as “slave” or “slavery” are often absent within tourism promotional texts and are in many cases substituted with words like “servant” or “laborer,” which obviate the need to discuss chattel bondage.<sup>23</sup> Some authors, such as Alderman and Modlin, have mentioned that the depictions draw on racial stereotypes of the typical slave and/or the happy go-lucky slave.<sup>24</sup> Other studies have focused on consumers’ reception of these historic sites and reveal that the ways in which the sites are rendered intelligible is influenced by the national identity of the consumer;<sup>25</sup> a study on visitor reception at Hampton Plantation revealed that nationals preferred to overlook the contentious past, whereas some foreigners, who visited the plantation in search of knowledge on the subject of slavery, were often disappointed at its elision.<sup>26</sup> The exhibition practices adopted by plantation museums have also been the focus of inquiry. Findings indicate that the displays mainly consolidate dominant notions of white citizenry *vis-à-vis* the disenfranchisement of African Americans,<sup>27</sup> though there are a few sites that deploy counter narratives to highlight marginal histories.<sup>28</sup> In

essence, the majority of these investigations indicate that contemporary plantation discourses perpetuate the historical racial inequities that characterized the plantation era, albeit through discursive means.<sup>29</sup>

Eichstedt and Small's seminal book, *Representation of Slavery*,<sup>30</sup> focuses on the plantation museum industry in the American South. It was inspired by the authors' interest in interrogating "racialized practices and ideologies in the United States...[and] how these play out in the realm of culture."<sup>31</sup> The authors argue that "racialization processes work in various locations, linked by shared and often overlapping ideologies and representations, to produce and reproduce racialized inequality and oppression."<sup>32</sup> According to the authors, the heritage industry, much like the housing and employment industries, is one such location in which "racialized imagery and ideology" are perpetuated.<sup>33</sup> Through a detailed analysis of 122 former slave plantations located in Virginia, Louisiana, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee, they examine the "partial, and racialized, histories that are enacted" in docent narratives.<sup>34</sup> Based on their fieldwork observations, they note that plantation sites endorse a predominantly "white-centric" imaginary through the conscious or unconscious implementation of four discursive strategies: namely, *symbolic annihilation and erasure, trivialization and deflection, segregation and marginalization, and relative incorporation.*

Symbolic annihilation is an interpretive approach that eliminates or minimizes African American presence in historical accounts of the slave past. Almost 83 percent of the plantation sites Eichstedt and Small studied employed this particular interpretive strategy.<sup>35</sup> Some sites adopted a trivialization and deflection strategy in which the African American story is woven into the narrative but in a manner that denigrates their contributions while highlighting the "positive" or benevolent markers of the institution of slavery. Segregation and marginalization of knowledge occurs when sites incorporate the historical accounts of African Americans but do so in separate tours (which are infrequently offered) and as such the two histories are presented as mutually exclusive. Although this move is a step in the right direction, such an approach is problematic because it reinforces the idea that the white-centric tour tells the main story. Sites that adopt the final strategy, relative incorporation, embrace an inclusive historical perspective. Such an interpretive strategy is "much more likely to raise issues that disturb a positive construction of whiteness" and at the same time challenge hegemonic themes that sublimate blacks' contribution to history.<sup>36</sup> Eichstedt and Small argue that the docent narratives used at plantation museums, however, are for the most part aligned "with the injustices that exist in the larger culture," thus perpetuating hegemonic ideologies and "reinforcing the silences, stereotypes, and erasures in people's minds."<sup>37</sup>

Museums today can address these imbalances, particularly on race, class, and gender issues, by making sure they go beyond *representational adequacy*,<sup>38</sup> that is the mere recounting of history as a fact of the past, to a dynamic contestable view of that past. This paper deals with the latent component of museological content and its link to judicial racial politics, and interrogates the “tragically closed history” of slavery for its emergent racial dynamics.<sup>39</sup> The representational strategies observed at many plantation museums seem to share some parallels with some key legal cases of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In order to delineate the link between current representations and the legal resonances emanating from the historical past, we explore judicial rhetoric that propelled and exacerbated the questions of citizenship. We conclude the paper by demonstrating the pertinence of cultural citizenship debates in rectifying the past and procuring a more equitable present. We argue that narrative reconstructions today can re-present the past from an equitable and just perspective.

### **African Americans as property not citizens**

For African Americans the nineteenth century was an era marked by the struggle to be recognized as human beings and as citizens. Dominant forces of the time, particularly the American Colonization Society (ACS), saw the repatriation of blacks to Liberia as a possible solution to the deepening race problem in America. Founded in 1816, the Society was comprised of Quakers and slaveholders. Quakers believed that the only way slaves could be free was through their return to Africa, while slaveholders favored repatriation because they viewed it as the only solution to the slave revolts which threatened their way of life. The prevalence of the repatriation rhetoric was even echoed by influential nineteenth-century artists such as the poet Walt Whitman. Like many of his compatriots, Whitman believed that America was a nation for whites and that African Americans, given their alleged critical mass, should be moved to “some secure and ample part of the earth, where they would have a chance to develop themselves, to gradually form a race, a nation that would take no mean rank among the peoples of the world.”<sup>40</sup> It was generally believed that the cry for basic human rights embodied in the call for the abolition of slavery was inconsistent with the political, economic, and social sentiments of the dominant society.

As could be expected, free blacks and political activists such as David Walker and Maria T. Stewart opposed the philosophy espoused by ACS arguing that it promoted the containment of African Americans. They countered the dominant rhetoric promulgated by ACS by adopting a discourse of belonging that was grounded in the ideals of the American

Revolutionary War. The slave population also utilized many creative ways to express their discontent with their objectification as property. This unambiguous dissent was also evident in the writings of fugitive slaves like Frederick Douglass and Harriett Jacobs, and in the increasing number of blacks who sought legal redress in the courts. Today, evidence of racial privileging witnessed in the narratives at some plantation heritage sites has its genesis in this racial past. The fact that blacks were denied citizenship then is very much reflected in how heritage sites portray them in contemporary society. Unlike their white counterparts, African Americans were relegated to a sub-human category and treated as property. They asserted their subjectivity through mini revolts, hampered the smooth running of the plantation system by destroying tools, or escaped north or into Indian Territory when the chance presented itself.

Dred Scott's attempt to challenge citizenship rights through the court system was one more attempt to question dominant ideologies of race. The Dred Scott case, which took place in March of 1857, was indeed a key historical moment in the debate over what constituted American citizenship. Dred Scott was an enslaved African who worked for John Emerson, an individual who resided in St. Louis but later moved to the free State of Illinois. Upon Emerson's death, ownership of Scott and his family was transferred to Mrs. Emerson, who at the time had very little use for the enslaved family. She thus hired Dred Scott out to Samuel Russell, an extremely cruel man who enslaved Scott for a number of years in the free State of Illinois. The civil rights opportunity afforded by the State of Illinois emboldened Scott to file suit in Federal Court against his enslaver, claiming that their residence on free soil entitled him to his freedom. Scott lost the case. The court maintained that blacks, whether enslaved or free, were not citizens of the United States, thus they had no legal right to sue in federal court. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, representing the Supreme Court, submitted that blacks, regardless of their status, "were not and could never become citizens of the United States." The Dred Scott trial took place during a tense time when the proponents of slavery seemed to have the upper hand in the nation's polity. The court ruled that blacks in America

had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and [so]...the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit.<sup>41</sup>

In fact, Chief Justice Taney strongly supported and reinforced the terms of bondage when he noted that "if Dred Scott succeeded in this litigation, his

owner, who had brought Dred Scott and his wife into the free state of Illinois for an extended period of time, would be deprived of his property."<sup>42</sup> This case both highlighted the conflation of race and property and affirmed the racial subordination of blacks.<sup>43</sup> The suppression of the human rights of African Americans was enforced not only through physical force but also through the legal portals of citizenship dissent. According to Alfieri, the denial of citizenship is in fact an issue that Frederick Douglass condemned in his American Anti-Slavery Society speeches.<sup>44</sup>

The Dred Scott case illustrates that the status of African Americans in America has always been tenuous. This landmark case had huge implications for blacks not only within the American South but also within the nation at large. The decision made no distinction between free blacks, who at the time enjoyed a relative amount of freedom, and enslaved blacks; all were to be viewed as subordinate and invisible beings; their subhuman status affirmed the humanity and citizenship rights of the legitimated white public. Ironically, the instability of the identities of blacks was not limited to color. White Americans also had an unstable image of themselves as they tried to grapple with the contradictions of the revolutionary ideals of freedom and the enslavement of other groups.<sup>45</sup> In fact slavery and its political connotations were tied to a regional reading of white citizenship.

This fractured and fractious image of white American identity suffered even more abroad. The pressures of a weak international image and the growing rift between the North and the South on the issue of slavery increased the enslavers' determination to further justify slavery as an ideal and benevolent institution.<sup>46</sup> Even after the Civil War, every effort was made by their descendants to memorialize their lifestyles through the institutionalization of plantation heritage sites. Thus, plantation heritage narratives are performed with the intention of foregrounding the experiences of the white planter class while silencing the life stories of the enslaved. The values that underpinned nineteenth-century America, which in essence informed the Dred Scott case, also inform the representational strategy of *symbolic annihilation* today. The value system that produced slavery laws legitimizing the institution of bondage was directly responsible for denying African American claims to citizenship; as such African Americans' access to legal rights in the nineteenth century were tenuous at best and nonexistent in most cases.

The blatant racisms of the Jim Crow era continued this collective ostracism, and the memories from this shadowed past continue to inform racial inequalities still abiding in the form of narratives, particularly heritage narratives. The *symbolic annihilation* of African American life stories in national heritage narratives help to undermine African American claims to cultural citizenship. In fact, African American culture was largely absent from mainstream museums of the early eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries.<sup>47</sup> Heritage sites that espouse this strategy are inadvertently affirming a nineteenth-century racial climate and aligning themselves with a certain worldview. Recurring themes within their approach entail accounts of the economic contributions of white planters and discussions of the architectural artifacts they left behind.<sup>48</sup> The version of the plantation past extolled by docent narratives in their adoption of this discursive strategy is an unabashed reverence for and celebration of white planters' ingenuity, mastery, and overall contribution to architecture and the local economy.<sup>49</sup> A powerful example of symbolic annihilation within plantation tourism heritage sites is evident when listening to the detailed analysis that docents give of the various accoutrements, furnishings, and lavish estates once owned by white planters. By framing the plantation narrative in a manner that imbues the audience with reverence for the white plantation owners, heritage producers prevent visitors from attributing any guilt to the enslavers for the suffering they inflicted upon the enslaved.

As mediators of public memory, heritage producers often paint a portrait of nationhood that showcases a racially homogenous national family, one in which the faces of acclaimed patriots are placed against silhouettes of colossal mansions, lush courtyards, and an enduring picture of prosperity. Within this exclusionary discursive frame, the citizenship rights of marginal groups are placed under erasure. It is not that slave material objects are all together absent on these plantations; it is that they are mostly ignored and remain unanalyzed, as if they carry little or no symbolic weight. Such institutional denial of cultural citizenship is intricately linked to other socio-political institutional discourses that sanction a similar definition of citizenship. The denial that underpins such retelling of the national heritage has been referred to as "symbolic racism," because it basically subordinates the narratives of other ethnic or racial groups, in this case Native Americans and African Americans.<sup>50</sup> Heritage sites can no longer justify, based on an absence of historical knowledge, the annihilation of narratives that highlight the relationship between physical exhibits on the plantation and the role of blacks to those objects, thanks to technological simulations that have in fact taken care of many gaps in historical accounts in many museums worldwide. It also can be argued that most objects on display at heritage museums as elevating the slave master's ingenuity are in fact masking the ingenuity of the slave population. Heritage museums generally circumvent such representational challenges. More research addressing these narrative elisions need to be carried out.

### **African Americans as provisional citizens**

Currently, heritage sites sublimate, elide or minimize the significance of African American contributions in docent narratives. This strategy, which Eichstedt and Small identify as *trivialization and deflection*,<sup>51</sup> often

privilege whiteness while minimizing the significance of slavery.<sup>52</sup> Knowledge of the legally sanctioned abuse of slaves in the past is consciously or unconsciously stifled when such narratives focus on relatively trivial events. Such marginalization thinly veils questions of the status and rights of blacks to the heritage claims displayed at these sites. Certainly, if blacks were seen as *property* rather than as *citizens*, giving them due credit is understandably a challenge. It is far easier to digress into lighthearted and flimsy stories about black-white relationships in the past. Given the fact that there are many recorded incidents of brutality against slaves offered by both slaves in their eyewitness narratives and in slaveholders' diaries, it is interesting that when slaves are mentioned on guided tours at such sites it is often in regard to their vices not their victim status. One example of slave abuse is on record about an 1829 court case that took place in North Carolina. The final verdict in the North Carolina Supreme Court case, *State v. Mann*, made it clear that the "power of the master must be absolute to render the submission of the slave perfect."<sup>53</sup> John Mann, the defendant in the case, had shot Lydia, a slave who was hired out to him. Lydia had continued to flee in defiance of Mann's order for her to stop running from punishment for a minor offense. The law upheld the unlimited power of the master to do with his *property* as he wished, thus supporting his action as necessary for maintaining the order of things — the superiority of the dominant white elite class and the perpetuation of the rights and privileges of whiteness.

Indeed, a good number of the minor offenses that blacks were accused of committing had to do with accusations of shiftlessness, laziness, and theft. These stereotypes have persisted throughout the centuries into our present day, as King argues in *Race, Theft, and Ethics*.<sup>54</sup> Slaveholders universally believed that slaves were all thieves, and they tended to perceive thieving as inextricable from blackness.<sup>55</sup> There are many recorded instances in which blacks contested this form of stereotyping, by justifying their right to the master's *table* because the master and the law had justified the thieving and enslavement of generations of Africans.<sup>56</sup> Where slaveholders refused to see their theft of persons as thievery, slaves also regarded their right to the master's food and other accessories as *taking*, not thieving.<sup>57</sup> Lydia was killed for trying to escape a whipping, whereas the law of the land supported slave owners in the outright disenfranchisement of an entire race.

The blatancy of the injustices of slavery, however, has not disappeared with either the repeal of slavery as an institution or the repeal of Jim Crow laws.<sup>58</sup> Rather, such injustice has disseminated into discursive sites located in places such as plantation museums, as Eichstedt and Small argue in *Representations of Slavery*. In identifying the racialized strategy of *trivialization and deflection*, these authors demonstrate that docents often

conduct tours in which the issue of thieving inadvertently or deliberately comes up as a laughable side of the plantation past. For instance, docents at the Hampton Plantation in South Carolina have been known to inform visitors about "the servants that stole and drank liquor because it was the only means of dealing with their employers."<sup>59</sup> In stressing that mistresses had keys to protect valuables from "servants" (the word "slave" is avoided for different reasons), or in pointing to infrastructures designed to protect valuables, or humorously highlighting regimens such as whistling that were put in place by slaveholders to prevent their "servants" from pilfering, the docents generally reinforce a major racial stereotype. Docents reinforce this stereotype without framing the issue of theft within the larger discourse of the history of theft that circumscribes America's origins: which is to say that empowered white immigrants stole the land from Native Americans and then stole Africans to farm the stolen lands for the enrichment of elite white males. Heritage sites routinely elevate the status of elite white males, since the very nature of the tour is designed to display the opulence of upper class southern whites, who seemingly through their own hard work and moral integrity and ingenuity were able to procure great mansions that are symbols of pride today. In short, the whole history of plantations, Eichstedt and Small argue, should be offered in a balanced way so that we can learn from all that was good and bad in the past.<sup>60</sup>

Heritage sites in the South also tend to deflect from the larger frame of the slave past by presenting the Civil War as a site of victimization of Southern whites, thus seemingly eliminating the suffering of blacks. Heritage sites deflect from the story of black disenfranchisement when they choose to focus on the ills suffered by southern whites at the hands of the aggressive North during the Civil War. It is not that Southern whites did not suffer as a consequence of the war, it is that the very reason for suffering (their insistence that a way of life built on the enslavement of stolen persons was justifiable) was often deflected into more obtuse causes, such as States' rights, the mission of civilizing Africans, and a mythic portrayal of plantation life as idyllic. The continued evocation of white suffering trivializes and sublimates centuries of black dispossession. It is not at all surprising that most heritage sites in the American South have been deliberately preserved as monuments to the *Lost Cause* and have emphasized the so-called heroic Confederate past.<sup>61</sup> Many scholars have argued that heritage sites intentionally promote revisionist history as a form of self-vindication.<sup>62</sup>

Within the nineteenth-century museum industry, the trivialization of African Americans was rampant in the pervasive themes that restricted African Americans to images of overly content and ignorant slaves who were unwaveringly faithful to their masters.<sup>63</sup> Cultural fairs of the post-Reconstruction era presented free blacks as "a band of old-time plantation

darkies" who could sing "quaint melodies and strum the banjo" for visitors. Most cultural fairs of the time celebrated "the slave days of the republic" and showcased "well behaved" and "ignorant contented" slaves.<sup>64</sup> Thus, when African Americans were recognized "it was typically in a viciously pejorative manner."<sup>65</sup> This minstrel tradition, which characterized theatrical performances and museological exhibitions of the nineteenth century, also discursively figures into the contemporary plantation museums. Remnants of such depictions are still present, as indicated by Alderman and Modlin's work.<sup>66</sup> The authors found that depictions of African Americans drew on framings of the typical slave as happy-go-lucky, docile, and cooperative. Thus, as custodians of the historical plantation past, some plantation museums inadvertently elide complex representations of African Americans through stereotypical depictions. This silencing and repudiation of the African American voice is akin to what Spivak refers to as epistemic violence.<sup>67</sup> Arguably, the citizenship rights of blacks, earned through hundreds of years of toil and labor on American soil, become a provisional status sublimated under the main narratives on white normalization and the unquestioned citizenship rights of whiteness.

### **(In)visible in plain sight: contesting citizenship (w)rites**

To counter the pervasive prejudice of the legal system, African American antislavery proponents linked African American personhood not only to legal instruments that underpinned the claims to citizenship by whites but also to the American landscape, in their emotional attachment to the land of their birth. Henry Highland Garnet for instance urged blacks to remember the tears, sweat, and blood poured, literally, into American soil, as evidence of their native born right to American citizenship.<sup>68</sup> Frederick Douglass would reiterate Garnet's discursive claims in a speech titled "The Free Negro's Place is in America."<sup>69</sup> Pleading with his white audience he stated:

We have grown up with you; we have watered your soil with our tears; nourished it with our blood, tilled it with our hard hands. Why should we not stay here? We came when it was a wilderness, and were the pioneers of civilization on this continent. We leveled your forests; our hands removed the stumps from your fields and raised the first crops and brought the first produce to your tables.<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore, Douglass insisted on the constitutionality of citizenship rights for blacks, making parallels between whites and blacks in the political sphere. Douglass's focus on the subject of citizenship for blacks was

in fact criticized by the famous black nationalist Martin Delany, who claimed that a focus on the term "citizen" would harm African Americans rather than work in their favor.<sup>71</sup> Delany argued that even if the right to be called citizens was granted to African Americans, it would not secure the privileges and rights they sought. He proposed that African Americans think about citizenship in terms of political rights.<sup>72</sup> Delaney was making an important claim that the struggle for recognition had to go beyond the letter of the law, so to speak, to the spirit of the law, where one's citizenship would register legally *and culturally*. As a political thinker, Delaney was far ahead of his time. His concern for political rights resonated in the post-Emancipation era when the equal but separate doctrine helped to plunge the American South into another dark phase in its racialized history; systematic racism became institutionalized under the Jim Crow laws. These discriminatory practices were imbued with the illusion of equality. Bowing to global pressures, the American South adopted strategies to maintain its strongly held belief in white supremacy, but it tried to give the world the impression that its treatment of its former slaves was fair and equal, albeit separate.

The social and cultural dissonance between the races endorsed a hierarchical citizenry and introduced discriminatory laws. A landmark case that encapsulates these late nineteenth-century societal values and perceptions regarding race is exemplified by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896.<sup>73</sup> The defendant, Plessy, was an individual of mixed race, seven-eighths white and one-eighth African. On June 7, 1892 he paid for a train ticket in Louisiana, boarded the train and sat in the section reserved for whites. He was asked to occupy a seat in the colored section or vacate the coach. Upon his refusal to vacate the seat, Plessy was forcibly removed from the coach by an officer and subsequently imprisoned. The court upheld the "separate but equal" doctrine that legitimized a Louisiana statute to segregate railway cars racially.<sup>74</sup> This doctrine, which emblemized the Jim Crow laws, inevitably resulted in "the systematic organization of space and place."<sup>75</sup> This ruling offered a superficial *equality* that could not camouflage the fact that African Americans were viewed as inferior citizens who were forbidden to use seating in public coaches occupied by white citizens. Later, it provided the legal basis on which public sites were segregated: the "division of the world into separate neighborhoods, schools, prisons, hospitals, and orphanages, funeral homes, cemeteries, hotels, brothels, telephone booths, blood supplies, toilets, drinking fountains, waiting rooms, textbook warehouses, courthouse Bibles, and theater seating."<sup>76</sup>

Arguing against the separate but equal doctrine, Justice John Marshall Harlan dissented in the *Plessy* case noting that the Constitution forbade divisions of citizenship on the basis of race or class. He asserted that

in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law....The law regards man as man, and takes no account of his surroundings or of his color when his civil rights guaranteed by the supreme law of the land are involved.<sup>77</sup>

It is important to note that Harlan was not arguing for color-blindness but rather for the basic rights and claims of citizenship to which all Americans, regardless of race, were entitled.<sup>78</sup> Legal scholars are in agreement that Harlan's dissent was an extremely important message, a crucial pre-text to the *Brown v. Board* case in the 1950s. When Martin Luther King, Jr., argued that his children should be judged by "the content of their character" rather than "the color of their skin,"<sup>79</sup> he was emboldened by the precedence set in Harlan's dissent and the *Brown v. Board* ruling.<sup>80</sup> The Supreme Court's decision in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case cannot be assessed in isolation of the climate of discrimination, mob violence, and lynching outrages that propelled social forces of the era. These informal social forces imposed a second class citizenship on minorities. Because the law upheld the sentiments of the majority, it indeed functioned as a product of the consciousness of that society.<sup>81</sup>

Today, plantation heritage sites are increasingly moving away from the annihilation strategies to an approach that incorporates the contributions of African Americans. Certainly, the move to a pluralistic approach to heritage is applaudable; however, this approach offers clusters of information in a segregated manner. That is, some of the sites which explicitly deal with the slave past do so through the dissemination of knowledge in two separate tours; one that provides what Eichstedt and Small refer to as the white-centric knowledge and another that focuses on the African American experience. By implementing dual narratives hinged on a racial divide, these heritage sites are in fact surrendering to the ubiquitous social force of white hegemony. Such heritage sites provide "equal opportunity" in regards to discursive representation but do so via mutually exclusive tours, in essence perpetuating the equal but separate doctrine that governed the late nineteenth century. This strategy of *segregation and marginalization* truly highlights a major problem in the narrative production of citizenship claims at plantation museums. At most sites where this strategy is employed the African American tours are not offered on a daily basis. For instance, one travel guidebook offers a description of Magnolia Mound (a plantation heritage site) and a narrative of its historical past by presenting readers with an opportunity to participate in a tour of the on-site slave cabins, a tour that is said to "go beyond the big house." Ironically, readers are also informed that this tour is available by reservation only.

Through segregation and marginalization, some heritage sites display two seemingly mutually exclusive narratives of the slave past.<sup>82</sup> Although this discursive strategy offers African Americans a place in American heritage narratives, it does need to move beyond mere discourse in order to meaningfully presence them or acknowledge the social inequities they have experienced;<sup>83</sup> the struggle, as Delaney had foreseen it,<sup>84</sup> remains at the level of rhetoric rather than action. One of the concerns of cultural citizenship studies is to effect the inclusion of marginalized groups at a subliminal level. That is that dominant groups should see the marginal as part of the fabric of everyday life both in the past and the present. When current narrative processes perform heritage in a partial and incomplete manner, this strategy further cements established nineteenth-century sentiments. Such a strategy ensures that the discourse of annihilation continues, undisturbed, within the white-centric tour. The discomfort of relating the African American experience to white audiences is thus eliminated when separate tours are offered. It is fair to say, along with Alderman, that blacks themselves have been sometimes ambivalent about the way slavery is articulated around them because of the obvious pain of such memories.<sup>85</sup> It is possible that this discomfort is part of why these narratives of domination continue.

### **Embodying citizenship: presencing the other**

The age of globalization has brought a change in the way in which cultural memory is performed, particularly the memory of the slave past. Given the cosmopolitan era in which we live, Americans are now increasingly encapsulating discursive reconstructions of the nation's slave past in a more forward-looking manner. The resulting pluralistic agenda at some heritage sites has led to the incorporation of the experiences of black and white Americans within the same narrative. This *relative incorporation*, as Eichstedt and Small label it,<sup>86</sup> is an example of the emerging cosmopolitan memory in the discourse of plantation museums. The few sites that employ such an approach attempt to destabilize traditional views of the white planter as the ingenious entrepreneur and/or the glorified social citizen. The emerging liberal atmosphere of the 1950s prepared the stage for the advancement of race relations at contemporary heritage sites; such sites are investing in a more equitable dialogue on the plantation past. Perhaps one can point to the celebrated Supreme Court case of 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education*, as a turning point in the attitudes of Americans to segregationist history. As the most important Civil Rights case in American history, *Brown v. Board* reversed the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling, thus rendering prior racially subordinating laws unconstitutional.<sup>87</sup> "The consequences of racialization became real for the Court. The Court's race-conscious

analysis in *Brown* was followed by a legislative revolution that furthered the destruction of the separate but equal doctrine.<sup>88</sup> The *Brown v. Board* decision and the continued struggle by blacks for social recognition led to large scale desegregation efforts within many American institutions and enterprises. It was followed by the dissolution of a number of discriminatory social structures that led to the desegregation at leisure facilities, such as museums, theaters, libraries, swimming pools and parks, to name a few. *Brown v. Board* was a quintessential example of the "modern law of race relations" in America.<sup>89</sup> The Supreme Court ruled that separate educational facilities were "inherently unequal."<sup>90</sup> This led to the desegregation of public schools. Nonetheless, such a seemingly simple act was a complex and challenging task because many interpretations and unexpected implications accompanied the verdict. Some viewed the ruling as representing the fundamental "belief of a color-blind society."<sup>91</sup> According to Torres, others interpreted it as a reincorporation of the concept of equality of education into the law, while some felt that the ruling was not about discrimination but rather about freedom of association. This judicial ruling on desegregation was loaded with politics. Even when an act is positively embraced by diverse groups in society, the politics of interpretation can still interfere with the way people view that act. Similarly, the strategy of relative incorporation at plantation museums, although forward-looking, might be interpreted differently by various groups of visitors, particularly given the fact that heritage representations draw on meanings and emotions that social agents construct and reinforce.<sup>92</sup> Fundamentally, heritage sites must frame their narratives in terms of the current political implication of the slave past because "our understanding of the past has strategic, political and ethical consequences. Contests over the meaning of the past are also contests over the meaning of the present and over ways of taking the past forward."<sup>93</sup>

The performance of heritage at plantation museums can incorporate the slave past in such a way that past elisions are corrected and the status of citizenship rights of suppressed groups are respected. However, this pluralistic performance of the contentious past must avoid registering the past as if all problems have been solved and society has moved on. To prevent that kind of misleading demarcation between the past and present, the heritage artifact in question should not simply emerge as an historical artifact to be admired. Such a strategy obviates the need to continue the discussion on society's past. Relative incorporation as a strategy, tends to promote a monologue that is directed and controlled by the heritage producers, and thus precludes a critical dialogue, one that could enable the museum visitors to engage the past out of the realities of the present. It is important for heritage producers to understand that the struggles and lessons in the present are very much rooted in the past.

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## Conclusion: cultural citizenship and public memory

Slavery is one of the most unsettling chapters in America's history. Recollection of this past conjures various and often conflicting emotions amongst the nation's citizens. The memorializing of America's past has resulted in the construction of a collective memory that actively negotiates contemporary politics of race. The end result is an engineering of collective memory that discursively manifests within master narratives, celebrating dominant value systems, while concurrently marginalizing subaltern histories. Plantation heritage sites are not innocent edifications; rather, they are representations of thoroughly ideological narratives bound up within political discourses that tacitly endorse dominant societal values. They are sites of authority in which memory and illusion coalesce to shape a romanticized recollection of the contentious plantation past. Indeed public memory is often designed to be democratic in its cultural expression or process of distribution. Thus, the commemoration of the plantation past is a highly politicized performance of public memory that privileges the feeling and emotional investment of the dominant society over that of marginalized groups.

This paper has focused on the various ways in which contemporary society is actively rewriting the historical script of the nation's slave past. The carefully crafted discursive strategies, much like the judicial racial rulings discussed, embody certain values that are rooted in the past and that inform contemporary society's relationship to the past. But in a world where the enslavers and the enslaved no longer exist, the link to the past, according to some scholars, is a tenuous one.<sup>94</sup> In light of this, although the past and its representation is important, the focus should be on the "honesty *vis-à-vis* the present as it re-presents the past."<sup>95</sup> Trouillot notes that we need not waste time condemning the institution of slavery, but rather we should focus on "the racist present within which representations of slavery are produced."<sup>96</sup> The key argument here is that the past is not fixed but very much linked to the present. Furthermore, Trouillot argues that even when heritage sites adopt empirical exactitude (for instance, relative incorporation as identified by Eichstedt and Small) if they do not make the link between the present and the past explicit they can inevitably trivialize that historical past. This is not to say that empirical exactitude is sufficient in and of itself; it has its limitations. It can offer cold distant facts without contextualizing them in the realities of the present, which runs the risk of putting closures to interstices such as words, silences, and semiotic erasures that need to be addressed.

Unless the past is usable in the present, the very life blood of that past is itself being sacrificed on the altar of social forgetting. Empirical exactitude can cage social groups in a particular time frame thus making the

current struggles these social groups face irrelevant. In short, nothing is fixed in terms of its value or power to mean, be it history, identity, or claims to citizenship; all are subject to change/contestation. Trouillot illustrates well the importance of letting the presentness of the past find relevance in our semiotic portrayals and in how we live our lives. Similarly, representations of the plantation era in the current American racial climate, particularly the discourse on post-racial America, have implications for how the nation views its relationship with its racial past and present.<sup>97</sup>

The relevance of current cultural politics to societal understanding of heritage and public memory is important. In the context of plantation heritage sites the present racial climate undoubtedly informs contemporary constructions of the plantation past, particularly as it applies to the current discourse on post-racial America. Although the election of Barack Obama has been hailed as the beginning of a post-racial era, Barnes, Chemerinsky and Jones remind us that such discourses have surfaced at other moments in American history, moments that these authors deem premature.<sup>98</sup> The motives and values that imbue and continue to motivate society to proclaim the nation post-racial are linked to the unaddressed issue of race in America. It would seem that heritage sites posit the race problem as fixed within the past where it cannot be dealt with; similarly, some debates on the racial climate today also elide the racial realities in America by imagining a future where it need not be dealt with. Inspiring as that may sound it leaves open an unresolved middle passage, called *today*, which must be addressed and redressed.<sup>99</sup> Post-racial discourse has been criticized for its unrealistic *recollection* of nation based on a premature foreclosure of the dialogue on race and social inequality.<sup>100</sup>

In fact, to evoke the discourse of post-racialism in America is to actually reanimate those strategies of symbolic annihilation evidenced in some heritage sites. It is to accept the fixity of the past. Yet the contingency of all social relations demonstrate the fluidity of history, politics, and the semiotics of culture. In this regard, the past is always in question and so too are the values imposed upon the reconstruction of the past. "Many collective memory scholars believe that the nature and interpretation of present day reality significantly determine the direction that reconstruction of the past takes."<sup>101</sup> In tandem, citizenship and the claims to citizenship are always negotiable.

It is instructive therefore to have a "radical concern with heritage and how it is being dramatized."<sup>102</sup> Because place or "space informs, limits and produces subjectivity,"<sup>103</sup> we can never simply assume that "the facts" (in this case the plantation museum as a site of the "facts") will speak for themselves, for such sites already demonstrate that people and issues can be invisible in plain sight. The semiotic index of docent narratives delineates a hegemonic contestation always at play. However, there is

optimism in knowing that societal structures are shifting more rapidly in response to global flows, which interpellate fissures, openings, and interstices in stolid traditional configurations, such as the plantation museum. In short, the provisional nature of culture and its knack for new “cultural vocabularies”<sup>104</sup> is putting pressure on traditional sites that have enjoyed the implicit backing of the law (many sites are supported by State funding) and that have been carriers of past judicial resonances as a matter of course. The debates on cultural citizenship contribute to the democratization of plantation museum narratives. We are hopeful that continued incorporation of diverse registers in docent narratives will open up vigorous debates in a climate open to an inclusionary cultural citizenry.

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