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## Memory

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PART 3

## **Controversies**



## 24. Slavery, Historicism, and the Poverty of Memorialization

*Stephan Palmié*

Visiting revolutionary Cuba in the winter of 1967–68, the Jamaican writer Andrew Salkey was one of the last ever to record a conversation with a person who remembered once having been a slave in a New World plantation society.<sup>1</sup> Born in 1860 to enslaved parents on a plantation in the province of Villa Clara, Salkey's centenarian interlocutor, Esteban Montejo, had run away as an adolescent, hiding in the woods for what may have been several years until news of the end of Cuba's first war of independence and the gradual abolition of slavery reached him. Yet slavery did not end in Cuba until 1886, and while Montejo seems to have worked for wages when he returned to life on a plantation, he lived under the shadow of slavery for the first quarter of a century of his long life.

Like many other visiting celebrities, such as the novelists Graham Greene and Hans Magnus Enzensberger and the composer Hans Werner Henze, Salkey had been introduced to Montejo by the Cuban writer Miguel Barnet, who had discovered Montejo in the course of a government-sponsored oral history project in 1963 and later published an internationally acclaimed testimonial novel, *Biografía de un cimarrón*, based on Montejo's tape-recorded reminiscences of his early life.<sup>2</sup> Accompanied by Barnet and an official "minder," Salkey met Montejo in a retirement home for military veterans and must have conversed with him for several hours. Their subjects ranged from Montejo's experience of slavery and of the second Cuban war of independence to life under the Cuban Revolution and his fervent admiration for Comandante Fidel Castro. The encounter left Salkey shaken. "I felt like a robber," he writes. "Had I taken too much from Esteban?"<sup>3</sup> Although it is difficult to say what exactly Salkey meant, it appears that what struck him was the realization that he had appropriated the limited time and energy left to a man who, in a past beyond any contemporary's remembrance, had

once been someone else's legal property himself. Perhaps Salkey had already begun to mourn Montejo as the last publicly known survivor of New World slavery, the last witness to a human tragedy of unfathomable proportions.

As Salkey seems to have sensed, Montejo's death in 1973 was to mark a historical juncture: the end of an era, by then of more than 400 years' duration, when the term slavery could still designate the contents of autobiographic remembrance. We will never know who may have been the last victim of New World racial slavery alive after Montejo's death. But it is clear that with his or her passing, the experience of slavery likewise passed out of "living memory."<sup>4</sup> By the end of the twentieth century, the grammatical and semantic range of possible statements about the particular form of slavery Montejo had endured as a young man irrevocably shifted from the realm of first-person propositions concerning past experience into third-person forms of discourse: local tradition, historical reconstruction, or organized public commemoration. This is not to say that institutions of extreme dependence and hyperexploitation *comparable* to historical forms of New World slavery did not persist beyond the point in time when Brazil became the last American nation to finally abolish chattel slavery in 1888. Nor is it to deny that forms of so-called "neo-slavery" that arose in the course of the twentieth century with or without state sanction do not command public attention.<sup>5</sup> It is to say that no one alive today in the Americas "remembers" how it felt to be a slave. Nor, for that matter, could anyone tell us what buying, owning, or selling human beings was like. Since both victims and perpetrators of what North Americans used to call the "peculiar institution" are gone, the profoundly difficult question facing their progeny—and, indeed, all of us (however we might wish to construct that pronoun)—has become how slavery and the enslaved can and ought to be remembered. No longer able to represent themselves and their experience of slavery, the slaves have to be represented.

My paraphrase of Marx's famous dictum is not capricious here. What it aims to evoke is a well-known paradox in the historiography of slavery that is patently evident in Montejo's case. For although Salkey assures us that he did not edit a single word of the interview Montejo granted him, it is hard to say who or what speaks to us from the pages of Salkey's book, let alone Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón*. Surely not Montejo's unmediated memory—a fact that seems to have dawned upon at least the publisher of a new Anglophone translation in changing the title from *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* to *The Biography of a Runaway Slave*.<sup>6</sup> Often regarded as a foundational text of the Latin American genre of "testimonial literature," Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón* foreshadowed, and indeed exemplifies, both the hopes western intellectuals invested in the potential of a counterhegemonic "poetics of solidarity"<sup>7</sup> and the deeply troubling implications of what Barnor Hesse, in speaking of nineteenth-century slave narratives, calls a mass-produced "symbolic commodity" that, far from reflecting genuine forms of subaltern consciousness and self-expression, represented a tightly controlled medium for the propagation "of the ethos of (white) abolitionism."<sup>8</sup> As critics of both *testimonio* and

the slave narrative have repeatedly pointed out, the individual voice of the formerly enslaved or oppressed that appears to speak from such accounts is not only irredeemably composite, but in fact functions as a carefully crafted authenticating device designed to create an impression of narrative immediacy and “unvarnished” truthfulness that underwrites, in Reinhardt Koselleck’s words, a strategically deployed “fiction of . . . facticity.”<sup>9</sup>

To be fair, Barnet never claimed to present the unedited recollections of an ex-slave. Instead, he explicitly conceived of the text he and Montejo produced as part and parcel of a revolutionary literature not only projected toward the “masses,” but, at least in part, authored by them as well.<sup>10</sup> True also that much of the criticism Barnet garnered from historians and anthropologists for the editorial and artistic license he took in reworking Montejo’s taped utterances and his refusal to make the original transcripts or tapes available may result from an anxiety about being cheated out of a set of primary data that, as things are, can only be gleaned from a document “corrupted” by Barnet’s authorial presence.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, few if any known first-person narratives of life “under slavery” could possibly escape the strictures historians have heaped upon Barnet’s—undoubtedly tendentious—rendering of Esteban Montejo’s words. In fact, the irony may well be not just that Barnet unwittingly replayed the role of the abolitionist amanuensis that so often has been regarded as the distorting filter between the authors of the vast genre of Anglophone slave narratives and their latter-day critical public; rather, as with the 101 known first-person accounts of the horrors of North American slavery published in England or the United States before the end of the latter country’s Civil War,<sup>12</sup> it is also that Montejo might have lived out his life in a revolutionary Cuban veteran’s home without anyone ever noticing him—taking his memories of slavery and heroic engagement in the second Cuban war of independence to his grave.<sup>13</sup> Phrased in more analytic terms, even if we discounted the multiple epistemological problems connected with autobiographical memory and first-person narrative that are dealt with elsewhere in this volume, the very conditions that appear to enable us to “hear” the slaves’ voices paradoxically militate against their construction as unmediated and authentic.

Yet if Montejo’s case seems to exemplify Spivak’s famous dictum that “the subaltern cannot speak” except in the distorting language of those who would deign to give him or her “voice,”<sup>14</sup> we need to ask: How then could there possibly be a “memory” of slavery? For Montejo’s case is obviously not an isolated one. Consider the more than three thousand interviews recorded with elderly North American ex-slaves between 1929 and 1938, mainly under the auspices of the Federal Writers’ Project, an initiative of the New Deal-era Works Progress Administration (WPA). As was becoming clear even when George Rawick published the first nineteen of a total of forty-one volumes of the narratives during the heyday of African American political mobilization in the United States in 1972,<sup>15</sup> the collection did not represent what historians like to call a transparent “window into the past” of slavery, but afforded—at best—glimpses through a glass darkened by multiple

distorting interferences. If a racist American academic historical establishment had refused to grant evidentiary value to the WPA narratives during the time of their production on account of their supposedly partisan bias, some of the stronger notes of caution were now voiced by black historians who feared that the conditions of their production might render them a deeply compromised source for the “empirical” reconstruction of the slave experience in North America.<sup>16</sup> They were, of course, right: the majority of the interviews were conducted by white interviewers in the then segregated South. They could be shown to have been spiked with leading, culturally insensitive, or otherwise methodologically inadmissible questions, burdened with context-setting strategies that misled the impoverished elderly consultants, or—alternatively—warped by the preconceptions and gullibility of interviewers unable or unwilling to question the misinformation they not infrequently were strategically fed. As the eminent black historian John W. Blassingame caustically summed up the concerns that had emerged soon after the publication of the collection, “uncritical use of the [ex-slave] interviews will lead almost inevitably to a simplistic and distorted view of the plantation as a paternalistic institution where the chief feature of life was mutual love and respect between masters and slaves.”<sup>17</sup> An interpretative cycle had closed: once rejected by white American historians as inappropriate to the project of a past designed to heal the wounds of a bloody Civil War fought, at least nominally, over slavery,<sup>18</sup> now the ex-slave testimony was viewed with suspicion by African American historians who questioned its appropriateness to the project of revising a fundamentally racist American historical canon in the post-Civil Rights era. Even when Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven Miller published a CD with excerpts of twenty-six of the thirty-three audio recordings of ex-slave testimony stored at the Smithsonian Institution,<sup>19</sup> the question of what exactly the ghostly voices of long-dead ex-slaves testify to—the past of nineteenth century slavery, the present of the 1930s, or a hopelessly overdetermined hybrid of both—could not be said to have been resolved. The ex-slaves, in Dwight McBride’s apt Derridean phrase, remained “impossible witnesses” to their own past<sup>20</sup>—or so it would appear from a historicist point of view.

Blassingame’s and other criticisms notwithstanding, the WPA collection *was* extensively used in U.S. social histories of slavery in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet it has only rarely been drawn upon (let alone explicitly discussed) in the literature dealing with slavery and memory that began to take shape by the late 1980s. Here it is worth noting how little this new literature has in common with previous attempts to mine the published nineteenth-century slave narratives or the WPA records for data from which to synthesize historical accounts of slavery. While social historians once agonized over how to counterbalance the multiple distortions inherent in both types of sources, test their contents for factuality, or establish criteria for the representativity of individual ex-slaves’ testimony about slavery, much of the current literature on slavery and memory seems fairly unconcerned with such methodological issues and indeed tends to make surprisingly little use of texts purporting to reflect the remembrances of individual slaves.<sup>21</sup> This might be taken to

relate to theoretically grounded suspicions about the nature of subjectivity and the opacity of *all* linguistically rendered “experience.”<sup>22</sup> But given the general absence, in much recent writing on slavery and memory, of principled epistemological arguments concerning the very notion of subject and object in any kind of propositions about the past, this seems unlikely.<sup>23</sup> Rather, it would appear that this ostensibly curious neglect of such documents relates to a fundamental transformation of the category of memory itself in much contemporary historiography. Put simply—and no doubt simplistically—by the 1980s, the meaning of the term “memory” began to rapidly shift away from first-person recollections of witnesses contemporary to historically significant events or processes and increasingly came to circumscribe forms of commemorative praxis on the part of social collectives whose members had never personally lived through the pasts so “remembered.” In the case at hand, this meant a fundamental reordering of the terms of debate. No longer primarily concerned with determining the “authenticity,” “accuracy,” and hence “validity” of ex-slave testimony pertaining to the *past that slavery was*, we seem to have become increasingly, if not always explicitly, concerned with the *past that slavery is*—or ought to be, given the structures of privilege and inequality of the world we currently inhabit.

This is clearly evident in some of the first publications explicitly foregrounding the issue of “memory” in the literature on slavery, such as the literary scholars Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally’s anthology *History and Memory in African American Culture*.<sup>24</sup> Conceived under the sign of Pierre Nora’s, by then increasingly influential, neo-Halbwachsian formulation about an antinomy between memory and history,<sup>25</sup> much of this volume set the tone for a rapidly expanding literature that came to emphasize an essentially romantic and often explicitly antihistoricist conception of memorial consciousness and commemorative practice—pitted against the then still prevailing empiricism of the so-called new social history’s study of slaves and other subaltern populations. Ostensibly purged of its deeply conservative Gallic nationalism,<sup>26</sup> and often analogized (explicitly or not) to the literature on Holocaust “memory” emerging at the same time,<sup>27</sup> Nora’s concept of collective memory as an organic source and vital medium of national identification became reconfigured as a means of popular counterhegemonic assertion: in much of the literature that emerged under labels such as “slavery in history and memory,” the verb “to remember” now designates an active, and often deliberate refusal on the part of racially marginalized populations in the United States to surrender collectively held visions of the past systematically devaluated or silenced in institutionally empowered forms of historiography. As a result, memory morphed from a source (however problematic) of evidence utilized in disciplined historical reconstruction into a metahistorical category denoting a stance toward and within contests about the public representation of collective pasts.

To a certain extent, this conceptual move was fruitful, for it directed attention away from the morally dubious positivism of an increasingly sterile debate on the reliability of a set of unavoidably problematic “primary documents.” Instead it focused attention on

the practice of representing slavery as a historical moment to which contemporary citizens of formerly slaveholding nations simply could not but relate, in one way or the other. Increasingly foregrounded as a past pragmatically significant in regard to contemporary social issues and political struggles or meaningful in respect to competing visions of collective futures, slavery gradually transformed from an experience over which people like Esteban Montejo might still have asserted an individual interpretative monopoly to a screen for the projection of diverse and fundamentally contested claims on larger histories. The upshot of this was a significant shift in the epistemic and representational status of the remembrance of slavery: rather than constituting the content of consciousness that has been held to define individual identity and personal continuity since the time of Locke and Hume,<sup>28</sup> “memory” now has become the corporate property of collectivities, mnemonic communities that have come to imagine themselves in relation to their perceived obligation to ensure the social reproduction of representations of pasts enacted or endured by people to whom such collectivities trace relationships held to be of continued (and corporatively constitutive) moral and political salience in the present.<sup>29</sup>

This, of course, is the sense in which the memory of slavery is nowadays invoked by activists and legal scholars in contemporary debates about retributive or restorative justice. Cases in point are the reparations movement in the United States<sup>30</sup> or the ongoing investigations of the legitimacy of land claims launched by or on behalf of descendants of runaway slaves (*quilombolas*) in Brazil.<sup>31</sup> Here it is clear that the term “memory” has largely come to function less to designate any specific content of what is in fact remembered (or forgotten) at any one point in a specific social context than to characterize the *form* of an explicitly collective “moral practice”<sup>32</sup> calibrating the legitimacy of present day social entitlements and iniquities in relation to the historical human disaster of slavery—conceived now as the “inalienable possession” of descendants of its victims,<sup>33</sup> and as a lasting moral debt on the side of descendants of its direct perpetrators or indirect beneficiaries. The pasts in questions here are by no means “over and done with.” As a chronotopic referent, circulating in and through such discourses, “slavery” now indexes a durational “past imperfect”<sup>34</sup> that continues to predicate present moral relationships.

The upshot of this has often been acrimonious debate about accountability and redress conducted along both forensic and actuarial lines: who profited from slave labor, how such profits might be assessed, what forms of “opportunity costs” were incurred by the victims, the extent to which slave labor underwrote the rise of the United States as a global economic power, or even how the proverbial “forty acres and a mule” might be translated into contemporary monetary values. These are no longer the academic questions they had been during the “cliometric boom” of the 1960s, when such debates were still largely restricted to the pages of the *Economic History Review* and similar such publications. Instead, and after several successfully initiated lawsuits against U.S. corporations such as the insurance giant Aetna, CSX Railways, and J. R. Reynolds, the question no longer appears one of mere quantification, but of the legal and philosophical grounds on

which restorative justice might be administered.<sup>35</sup> Space does not permit an adequate discussion of the multiple and truly agonizing ethical and political issues involved here. But the debate itself increasingly shows that attempts at quantitative reckoning tend to recur to the same forms of empiricist arithmetic and objectivist historicism that the calls for a categorical *devoir de memoire* (obligation to remember) originally aimed to unhinge.

The danger here seems to lie not just in trivializing, by quantification, the incommensurability of the sheer tragedy of New World slavery and ignoring the cultural and ideological centrality of its regime of systematic dehumanization in the formation of Western modernity itself.<sup>36</sup> Nor is it merely that slavery's lasting impact on post-emancipation schemes of racially iniquitous nation building might be written off through "terminal" compensatory settlements purporting to wipe clean the historical slate without effectively addressing contemporary structures of privilege and inequality. Rather, and as in the debate about apologies for slavery, a major part of what is at issue, is the nature of the collective subjects involved in making or accepting amends for the historical wrong of slavery: since neither victims nor perpetrators of slavery are alive today, how other than by positing *essentialized* transhistorical continuities, on the level of corporative legal and moral identities, might one establish juridically enforceable or even only ethically binding relations between pre-Civil War U.S. slaves or slaveholders on the one hand, and anyone clearly recognizable group of present-day citizens of that nation on the other?<sup>37</sup> Such historically transcendent corporate identitary essences are precisely what contemporary discourses on mnemonic communities claim to bring to light. But as Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued,<sup>38</sup> they tend to do so on the template of an ideology extending the model of liberal possessive individualism not only into politically dubious conceptions of society as a collection of otherwise autonomous "heirs" to the estate of memory, but also across stretches of time in a manner that is intrinsically implausible by virtue of the very model of the historically unencumbered individual market actor such constructions of collective memory take their departure from.<sup>39</sup> Instead of marking a "departure from liberal discourse in which equality is achieved through the suppression of the past,"<sup>40</sup> the mnemonic essentialization of collective identities paradoxically returns us straight to the core of such discourse.<sup>41</sup> In the case at hand, slavery is denounced as an aberration from the principle of individual liberty on the very grounds that once had made slaveholding possible—the individual subject's inviolable rights to property<sup>42</sup>—and that continue to render contentious forms of transformative justice based in conceptions of structurally embedded collective rights and obligations, such as affirmative action.

But this is not the only irony involved here. For the switch from an (epistemologically problematic) objectivist sense of slavery's "historical truth" to a formally far more relativistic "politics of memory" is also evident in the blatantly self-congratulatory manner in which, for instance, France's president Jacques Chirac, five years after the French Senate had passed *la loi Taubira*, declaring slavery a "crime against humanity,"<sup>43</sup> could celebrate the "first commemorative day in metropolitan France for remembering slavery and its

abolition.” As Chirac triumphantly put it on May 10, 2006, “Faced with the infamy of slavery [France] took the requisite action, [and] was the first to do so.”<sup>44</sup> Though Chirac’s immediate reference was to the emergency decree declaring general emancipation that the Revolutionary Civil Commissioners Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Étienne Polvorel had issued in war-torn St. Domingue in 1793, what he failed to properly emphasize was not only the fact that Napoleon reinstated slavery in the French overseas colonies less than ten years later, but also that *la Grande République* had rather less than historically transcendent reasons for celebrating its record on human rights at that particular point in time: although the coincidence was likely fortuitous, the fact that Paris’s largely nonwhite and Muslim-inhabited *banlieux* had, only months before, exploded in the worst civil unrest the country had seen since 1968 was certainly not without relevance for the occasion. Surely, what we are dealing with here is all but what Wendy Brown calls the establishment of a morally binding “connection of a particular [transformative] political aim in the present with a particular formation of oppression in the past.”<sup>45</sup> It is the commemorative creation of a safe distance between loudly proclaimed past “crimes against humanity,” and the unspoken racism and iniquities of the present.<sup>46</sup>

This example underscores Trouillot’s and Saidiya Hartman’s point that acts of commemorating slavery (or its abolition) tend to rest on the classic historicist axiom of an unbridgeable temporal distance between the event and its present day (historiographic or mnemonic) recall.<sup>47</sup> At the very least, this is so because the commemorative “retrieval” of past events presupposes a notion of the objective givenness and unalterability of the past.<sup>48</sup> Yet this notion of a fixed, objective past whose ontological as well as epistemological separation from the present must be upheld lest “the past” be contaminated by “presentist” concerns is in itself not only logically unsound but deeply ideological.<sup>49</sup> This is amply evident in a contemporary culture of organized public commemoration that elides and silences continuities between past and present in the service of Whiggish teleologies of progress, domesticates wrongful pasts through what Elizabeth Povinelli, in a somewhat different context, calls the “cunning of recognition,”<sup>50</sup> or forecloses significant political options by fetishizing an originary trauma at the expense of an effective exposure of mechanisms of the reproduction and transformation of relations of power and inequality. For once the latter have become subsumed under and absorbed into the histrionic pathos of factually inconsequential celebrations of victimhood and contrition, such reifications of the past effectively become, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s famous words, instances of forgetting.<sup>51</sup> In either case, the results, it would seem, are often aimed less at redressing present-day iniquities in the name of past injustice than toward increasingly shallow performances addressing an “international community” allegedly watchful of contemporary collective subjects’ politically correct enactment of simulacra of historical consciousness and responsibility.<sup>52</sup>

That these two moments—mere histrionics of atonement and inconsequential reclamations of commemorative recognition—can go hand in hand, is demonstrated by the

mnemonic projects for which the Maison des Esclaves in Gorée, Senegal, has become a lasting metonym. Here, it would seem, we have a prime Nora-esque “lieu” of transatlantic “memory.” Declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1980 and currently the focus of organized mass tourism, this structure, apparently a fine example of eighteenth-century French colonial architecture, has since 1995 become the object of both global commemorative cathexis and disciplinary historical abreaction. That year, a brief posting on the newly founded internet listservs H-Africa and H-slavery by the American historian Philip Curtin elicited storms of protest. What Curtin, an expert on Senegalese history and the slave trade more generally, had argued was not only that Gorée had played a negligible role in the slave trade from Senegal. More than that, Curtin maintained, on apparently good evidentiary grounds, the edifice known as the Maison des Esclaves had never been used as a commercial slave entrepot, and its famous “door of no return” (through which, by that time, thousands of African American tourists had passed in organized reenactments of the beginning of the “Middle Passage”) had never served the function of delivering captive Africans to waiting European slave ships.<sup>53</sup> Calling the Maison des Esclaves a “hoax” and a “scam,” Curtin immediately drew fire from a variegated but mostly academic on-line audience.<sup>54</sup> Though some of Curtin’s critics raised the question of a Eurocentric definitional monopoly over what was to count as “evidence” of the devastating import of the Atlantic slave trade, perhaps predictably, the debate largely focused on the “veracity” of the claims of Joseph Ndiaye, a Senegalese amateur historian who had managed to launch the piece of real estate in question to global attention.

Dissent on the part of Curtin and other professional historians, however, does not seem to have impeded visits to Gorée’s Maison des Esclaves by such late-twentieth-century dignitaries as Pope John Paul II, Nelson Mandela, Bill Clinton, and—in 2003—George W. Bush, who delivered not the kind of apology for slavery his presidential predecessor Clinton may (or may not!) have pronounced there, but a trite rumination on the progress of liberty and democracy the United States had inspired, if not always actively aided.<sup>55</sup> But is irony really involved here? And if so, where does it reside? Is it that the Pope, Mandela, Clinton, or Bush chose to commemorate the “right thing” in the “wrong place”? Or is the issue of “historical accuracy” merely a screen beyond which other questions may be safely put aside? In fact, there may be at least two grounds on which to rest an argument that it really doesn’t matter if Ndiaye’s Unesco-authorized narrative about the Maison des Esclaves corresponds to “historical actuality.” The first is that, given the sheer scope of transatlantic slaving, pretty much any spot on the West African coast along an arc stretching from Senegambia to present-day Angola might serve as an appropriate commemorative site.<sup>56</sup> The second, more critical issue concerns whom such commemorative acts are supposed to involve and address. At least in the case of Bush’s visit to Gorée, the inauthenticity of the ritual gesture arose not from a misplaced concreteness of location but from misdirected acts of illocution. For as Michael Ralph notes, Bush’s ringing praises of freedom were pronounced in the absence of virtually all Senegalese denizens of Gorée

island—rounded up and confined as they had been, during Bush’s visit, in a local soccer stadium by security forces guaranteeing the unimpeded historical reflexivity of the president of a nation that, by then, had become Senegal’s second major international economic underwriter.<sup>57</sup> Clearly, whatever the historical status of the *Maison des Esclaves* may be, the hoax and sham perpetrated here was not of Ndiaye’s making. Yet if that is so, would not the—irresolutely present—context and implications of such utterances about the past be the yardstick by which we might want to measure the moral (and ultimately historical) import of such talk? Is it more troubling to misremember a set of morally irrelevant “facts” (by whoever’s standards these may be so construed) in the service of re-presenting past horrors than to commemoratively disestablish a connection between unquestionably immoral pasts, and morally questionable presents?<sup>58</sup>

Professional historians, at least in North America, have tended to be singularly equivocal in their increasingly frequent pronouncements on such matters. Consider the 2003 presidential address to the Organization of American Historians, by the leading contemporary historian of Colonial American slavery, Ira Berlin. Giving a detailed and admirably nuanced overview of the multiple controversies that broke out in the United States over the “memory of slavery” at the turn of the twenty-first century,<sup>59</sup> Berlin rightly homes in on what he sees as a tendency for slavery to have “become a language, a way to talk about race in a society where race is difficult to discuss” and where “much of American life—access to jobs, housing, schools, medical care, justice, and even a taxi—is still controlled by race.”<sup>60</sup> “The renaissance in the interest in slavery,” he writes, “has become an emblem, sign, and metaphor for the failure to deal directly with the question of race and the long legacy of chattel bondage.”<sup>61</sup> These are important insights. But Berlin lets go of them almost as soon as he has voiced them. Instead, he veers into a defense of academic historicism against undisciplined visions of history (“memory”), arguing for what he, in an astonishing case of misplaced irony, calls the “freeing of slavery in the United States from the stereotypes that have bound it.”<sup>62</sup> Almost predictably, in what follows, Berlin recurs to intellectually and politically highly troubling commonplaces in contrasting images of “memory’s” partisan particularism, presentistic orientation, exclusivity, emotional appeal, static and transhistorical vision, and generally uncritical nature with the historian’s “skeptical and detached” labor in the service of “careful, dispassionate reconstruction of lived experience.”<sup>63</sup> Ever mindful of the “axiom that the past is a foreign country and that it must not be studied with an eye to the present, not looking for precursors of nowadays or harbingers of the contemporary world,”<sup>64</sup> Berlin’s “historian,” we are led to believe, is the ultimate guarantor of, and last bastion between, an honest empiricism and a wild jumble of competing (and often mutually contradictory) populist presentisms. Of course, like many of his colleagues, Berlin eventually concedes that the historian can no longer ignore the “memory of slavery,” for “because it touches individual men and women with such power, memory becomes the driving force in the search for social

justice, the mortar that bonds the violations of the past to the grievances of the present.”<sup>65</sup> Still, such “memory” ultimately militates

against the skeptical, critical, and all-inclusive inspection of the past that is at the very heart of the historical enterprise. For those who draw on the remembered past, the study of slavery is not something that can be viewed dispassionately, questioned, inspected, and debated. Their truth is not one among many. Their understanding must be recognized, embraced, and celebrated, for the reality of slavery was absolute and undeniable.<sup>66</sup>

“History and memory,” Berlin concludes, “both speak to the subject of slavery and the long experience of people of African descent in their American captivity, but they speak in different tongues,” and “not surprisingly, where history and memory meet, the results are often unpleasant.”<sup>67</sup>

Like many other American historians,<sup>68</sup> Berlin eventually closes on a conciliatory note. Despite it all, he says, history and memory “desperately need each other,” lest in the case of slavery, “memory is denied and history is allowed to trump memory, [so that] the past becomes irrelevant to the lives of all Americans at the beginning of the twenty-first century,” or, alternatively, lest “memory is allowed to trump history, [so that] the past becomes merely a reflection of the present with no real purpose other than wish fulfillment or, at best, myth with footnotes.”<sup>69</sup> That may or may not be so (and, in any case, would seem to depend on an undertheorized, and ultimately banal, conception of *both* memory and history, in which the former has become a mere gloss for what, only half a century ago, most American professional historians would have written off as the product of the undisciplined popular historical imagination anyway). Yet is the “unpleasantness” professional historians encounter when publicly confronted with passionately defended but “unevidenced”—and perhaps unevidencable—versions of the past only the result of a denial of the gratifications of historical wish-fulfillment to personally aggrieved or otherwise interested—and so necessarily uncritical—memoriophiles<sup>70</sup> by the steely-eyed historian, undauntedly facing up to the truth? And is Berlin’s ultimate call for “testing memory against history’s truths and infusing history into memory’s passions” in order to achieve a national past “that is both memorable and, at last, past”—over and done with—not a paternalistic evasion of the fundamental issues at hand? Is it the professional historian’s job to tell people what to remember, and is it theirs to develop suitable passion for such properly authenticated versions of the past? Or are we witnessing the emergence of a historiographical equivalent to the “false memory syndrome” controversy in American psychotherapy?<sup>71</sup> Phrasing the matter in such polemical terms does not make the answer to these questions any easier. But it might point us toward a potentially more fruitful conception of what Bourdieu might have called the “field of historical production.”

Like it or not, American historians nowadays confront a plethora of extra-disciplinary (and sometimes positively anti-disciplinary) discourses laying claim to and aiming to authorize versions of the past of slavery. Speaking with Foucault,<sup>72</sup> one might argue that Berlin's undoubtedly well-meant call for a reconciliation between the "history" and "memory" of slavery is but a belated reaction to an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" that American social historians themselves unwittingly encouraged when breaking up the normalized code of white male "national history" that W. E. B. Du Bois once bitterly denounced as a form of "propaganda" requiring a "searing of the memory" that rendered the memories of ex-slaves and the historical vision of their descendants irrelevant to the projection of a canonical "national past."<sup>73</sup> Alternatively, one might argue that the gradual, usually belated, and often all but uncontroversial embrace of "minority" history by the American historical profession ultimately failed in achieving its end; the result instead is what Gramsci might have called a state of "transformist hegemony" where the selective incorporation of the cultural productions (here: expressions of historical consciousness) of subaltern groups into a reigning cultural consensus diffuses their oppositional potential and so only solidifies ideological domination.<sup>74</sup> Either way, however much one might sympathize with the plight of historians like Berlin (whose seminal contributions to the social history of North American slavery are undeniable), it will not do to erect rhetorical barriers between a "history" of slavery and its supposedly undisciplined, irrational other, "memory." This is so because the disinterest or even distrust academic historiography of slavery confronts particularly, but not only, among African Americans ultimately bespeaks forms of historical consciousness that neither build on nor seek authorization in Berlin's historicist "axiom that the past is a foreign country." Instead, and precisely because the past is *not* a foreign country but—once summoned—constitutes a domestic issue of the here and now, such oppositional forms of the historical imagination need not obey the evidentiary canons of post-nineteenth-century Western historiography. In fact, in sometimes positively privileging the objectively unevincible over "established facts," they merely exemplify that any form of knowledge production concerning the past necessarily takes shape within what Koselleck calls historically as well as socially specific "spaces of experience" and "horizons of expectation"<sup>75</sup> that include, in this case, principled suspicions about pasts that do not correspond to any form of morally credible present social arrangements. Let us not mince words here. Both "history" and "memory" ultimately revolve around and in turn aim to fashion, authorize, and motivate specific definitions of moral community *in the present*. What they differ on—at least in the case at hand—are the standards of plausibility in regard to which "pasts" might convincingly underwrite what "presents."<sup>76</sup>

To argue as much is, in my view, not at all to endorse an all-out relativism that might come to sanction frivolous denials of massive atrocities. Nor need taking such a stance oblige us to lend credence, a priori, to unsubstantiated claims to "memories" of past injustice and tragedy. It is to ask how we can study *any* claim on the past as a proposition

issuing from, situated within, and aiming to make an impact on, a larger, contemporary discursive and social field. As Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart phrase the issue at hand, whether “realized in Western societies or elsewhere,” the study of representations of the past *as cultural forms in social circulation* is not in itself “concerned with objectivity, accuracy and factuality in local accounts of the past”;<sup>77</sup> what it is concerned with is the cultural and political investment in, and work performed by, such accounts within specifiable social settings, including the institutional structures that underwrite the contextual acceptability of *some* of them as “truthful” representations of the “actual” past.

Of course, to engage in such a project might force us to abandon a good part of the methodological canon on which contemporary history stakes its disciplinary identity. But what, apart from an ultimately spurious sense of the boundaries of the discipline of history, might be at stake in entertaining, if only for epistemological reasons, a “coherence theory of truth” about the moral significance of present statements about the past? One thing that *is* certain is that it would be hard to sustain the dichotomy between memory and history on such grounds. What David Scott calls “verificationism”<sup>78</sup> will then have lost much of its purchase as a technique to authorize the one and delegitimize (or functionally reduce) the other. But might this not lead to a clearer, sociologically more precise and politically more consequential understanding of the kinds of social “past-relationships”<sup>79</sup> both terms would seem to address?