Recollections on Interpreting Slave Life and Falling into Your Purpose

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“How did you get into interpreting slavery?” My path into interpreting the lives of the enslaved came after years of rebelling against doing something, anything, related to African American history. It came from often being the only Black person in a history class. It came after years of teachers telling me what I needed to do, who I needed to study, and what I needed to talk about. I arrived on this path to interpreting slavery only reluctantly, after years of challenging others’ assumption that I was the content expert for all things Black and the spokeswoman of the Black experience.

I hated it.

The color of my skin did not make me an expert in anything related to the African American experience. It did not make me the scholar on all things Black. I was not your Encyclopedia Black-tannica. I wanted to learn about the second rising of the Klan—what triggered this intense campaign against Black bodies? I wanted to know the plight of the poor yeoman farmers, White plantation mistresses, free Blacks, and overseers. I wanted to get to know the people who were hidden in the pages of our history books, not the usual actors we were introduced to. I was sitting in a graduate course at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte when all of that changed. John Flower unknowingly managed to do what many had tried. He offered a simple assignment in my digital history class. It was something along the veins of finding
how history was discussed on the internet and write about it. Suddenly, I wanted to know how slavery was being talked about in the digital world. Who were the thought leaders around the study of slavery in 2006? The assignment led me down a rabbit hole of PBS documentaries and historic sites. I wasn’t completely satisfied with what I found and wanted to make sure that more was being done. Without that assignment, and the freedom to do whatever I wanted, I would not be here interpreting the lives of the enslaved and telling the stories that I resisted for so long.

The examination of narratives regarding the enslaved at historic sites, and the history of slavery at them opened my eyes to the amount of work public historians had and still have in front of them. Discovering that there were places more focused on architecture than on the labor that had crafted it was a bit bothersome. More so, the unchallenged suggestion that plantation owners planted two hundred acres of cotton, created by the omission of stories about the people who actually toiled in the fields, was downright disturbing. Yet this was the common visitor experience. The lack of stories and other representations of Black bodies was not so much disturbing as it was sadly expected. Who in their right mind would want to “act like a slave” all day for the amusement of some and education of others? I did not realize it at the time, but I was looking at my future as a public historian. Finding the answers to all those questions has been my work ever since. And to the “acting like a slave” question? Here I am.

It would be easy to say that I was made for this work, but I was not. I had to be comfortable in my own skin and comfortable in the history of my ancestors. When the history of slavery is presumed to interest you only because of your skin, it can be discouraging and dismissive. Some say they are called to do this work. I don’t know if I was called to do this, but I feel like it is the best way for me to discuss history with others. You have to be comfortable being uncomfortable. I like to think that I am helping people deal with a discomfort that seemingly cloaks discussion of slavery in the United States. While I know many wonderful first-person interpreters like Dontavius Williams, who performs the Chronicles of Adam, or Cheyney McKnight of Not Your Momma’s History, I am served best doing third-person interpretation. By addressing visitors in the third person, I am able to meet them where they are and to help them make meaningful connections. Popular culture often provides a common ground for working with visitors to achieve a new level of understanding. The popularity and long history of “Moonlight and Magnolias”
tours, which have represented slave owners as gentle and enslaved people as docile—even grateful, has proven to be a challenge for helping visitors recognize the full and complicated experiences of the men, women, and children whose labor not only built the sites but also created wealth for those who claimed ownership of their bodies.

Colonial Williamsburg took a radical approach to interpreting the lives of enslaved men and women in 1994 when the staff and committee on African American Interpretation and Presentations reenacted a slave auction. Then director Christy Coleman defended the decision to hold the reenactment, stating, “The legacy of slavery in this country is racism, and until we begin to understand the horrors that took place, people will never come to understand what’s happening in our society today.” Making both staff and visitors face the horrors of slavery head-on, while traumatic, can be extremely impactful and important in discussing one of the most painful moments of our nation’s past. Today, visitors to Williamsburg can see the lives of African Americans by exploring the Peyton Randolph House, where you can “gain knowledge of the early African American experience . . . and discover how the enslaved members of the household struggled to find their own roads to freedom,” or by walking through Great Hope Plantation to engage in southern plantation life. The Slave Dwelling Project, headed by historian Joseph McGill, seeks to “identify and assist property owners, government agencies and organizations to preserve extant slave dwellings.” The project also has a living history arm, Inalienable Rights: Living History through the Lives of the Enslaved. The program, first funded by a grant from the South Carolina Humanities in 2016, assembles living historians who participate in cooking demonstrations, blacksmithing, or storytelling. Each Inalienable Rights experience includes an overnight stay at the site, which must include an extant slave dwelling. These overnights are not your typical sleepover. Often the public is invited to participate in a deep conversation about racial tensions of the past and today and what ways the country can learn from the past for reconciliation in the present and future. These conversations are meant to challenge how we view current issues regarding race in a space that was created by systemic racism. Now in its third year, this small ensemble, of which I am a part, continues to change the narrative of the enslaved population at historic sites. With a multifaceted approach, visitors are able to see first-person interpretation in storytelling, third-person interpretation in cooking, and receive a history lesson in Gullah-Geechee culture. By offering various methods of interpretation,
Inalienable Rights and the Slave Dwelling Project push the envelope, changing the narrative around what the interpretation of slavery should look like while reclaiming often forgotten spaces that represent an often forgotten population. Through the work of these sites and organizations and individuals like Dontavius, Cheyney, and James Beard Award–winning author and food historian Michael Twitty, the public has the opportunity to see the humanity in a community whose members were considered three-fifths of a person. While my story starts with a class assignment in graduate school, the education really began once I got into the field and put in hours of work. It started simply enough with an internship and has been a state of constant evolution ever since.

**Taking the Plunge into the Past**

The first time I stepped on a plantation to do work was when I interned at Historic Latta Plantation in Huntersville, a suburb of Charlotte, North Carolina. Built in the late eighteenth century by Scottish merchant James Latta, Latta Plantation is a Federal-style plantation home in Mecklenburg County. It is now a living history museum that offers tours of the historic house and grounds, as well as educational programs for students, but was once home to thirty-three enslaved men and women, along with Latta; his wife, Jane; their daughters, Nancy, Polly, and Betsy; and a young son, Ezekiel. What drew me to the site was that it was local and somewhat hidden; many visitors did not even realize the plantation was there, hidden in the Latta Nature Preserve. The history of slavery is similarly hidden in Charlotte. Nonetheless, Latta Plantation and the Latta Nature Preserve are popular with school groups and casual site visitors often respond positively to “discovering” the plantation. In addition to its educational programming, Latta hosts numerous special events, including Civil War reenactments. I was impressed that the site acknowledged the thirty-three enslaved men, women, and children by name—it was the first time I’d seen the population recognized in this way. My research focused on all thirty-three, but I was intrinsically drawn to Sucky, who by all accounts was the cook and Jane Latta’s personal slave. I was able to track her whereabouts after the family left the plantation because she accompanied Mrs. Latta to Mount Mourne after Mr. Latta’s death. I’m not sure why I was so drawn to her, but Sucky—who was always listed with a child—may have been the reason I’ve taken such a personal approach to telling the story of the enslaved. Her journey stood out to me, and I wanted to
tell her story. Since then, I have made it a point to speak for those like her and give them the voice history books have, until now, silenced.

During my time at the Latta Plantation, I observed visitors when I was not researching the enslaved. I watched them listen to the tour guides and be amazed at the house but ignore the ditch in the doorway possibly caused by the server who, after bringing food from the kitchen into the house, would stand there until called upon. The tour spoke mostly to the house and the Latta family, and not many visitors asked about the labor. Since the tour was only of the homestead and not of any other buildings, questions seemed to focus on the construction of the home, the rooms, and what the family would be doing in the space. I wondered how the staff would have interpreted the living space of the slaves and talked about the list of names. How would they discuss Peter, who ran away from the plantation in 1826? How would they explain the sale of slaves at the time of Latta’s death? The thoughts I had while observing visitors’ reactions to the physical structure of the home helped me begin to imagine how to structure a tour that featured the experiences of the enslaved. Watching helped me understand why people come to plantations, and it also showed me how easy it was for a site to ignore its history: visitors weren’t asking about the enslaved population.

Based on these observations, I created several interpretive components for the site as a part of my thesis project. One of those components was an educational tour that focused on the lives of the enslaved. When I observed tours, I noticed that visitors connected to the history of the site best when hearing stories about the family. Why couldn’t a tour that focused on stories about Sucky, her child, Peter; and the others create similar connections? The perfect place for this interpretive approach was the reconstruction of a slave cabin that had housed the thirty-three men, women, and children who were enslaved by the Latta family. I spent a lot of time in that space, envisioning what the landscape looked like when the Latta family lived there. The slave cabin was a home, something that all visitors could relate to. The tour I designed helped visitors recognize that enslaved people occupied every space on the plantation, from the home to the kitchen to the fields, both public and private spaces. I wanted the tour to introduce visitors to the enslaved population as a community of people who created a world within a world, and who had thoughts, emotions, desires, and skills not unfamiliar to most visitors. One school lesson I created highlighted the impact that the Latta family’s economic decisions had on enslaved families. After Mr. Latta’s death,
his will distributed property—including enslaved people—among his children and to settle his debts. This meant that enslaved people saw their families broken up, as children were sent to live and work on other plantations. I also designed a permanent exhibit installed inside of the walls of the cabin—a timeline detailing the history of the enslaved people on site. It spanned forty years and began with two unnamed slaves listed on the 1800 census and ended with the twelve slaves named in court documents detailing James Latta’s estate.

My time at Latta proved to me that this was a line of work I was willing to do. I wanted to break down the walls that made history seem boring to average people. These were powerful stories, and I knew they could make history interesting and meaningful for visitors. I also wanted to make sure site interpretation demonstrated respect for the lives of enslaved people. But questions remained. While I was an intern at Latta, I was somewhat removed from visitors. I designed interpretive materials, but I did not do the interpretation myself. I conducted the research and left the difficult work to others. I wasn’t sure I was willing to put myself on the frontline.

**The Brattonsville Experience**

My first professional experience as an interpreter began when I went to work at Historic Brattonsville. This was the first time that I worked at a site in costume, telling the story of the enslaved and really implementing the work I had imagined in my thesis. I encountered many guests who were frequent visitors. They had become accustomed to hearing about White families as the defining residents of plantation homes, and they were often apprehensive about interacting with interpreters who focused on the “hidden population.” These visitors were sometimes facing the reality of slavery at these sites.
for the first time, and I was fully invested in finding ways to open up their understanding. I actively challenged the absence of interpretation about slavery and the enslaved community by finding ways to humanize the experience and connect with even the most reluctant visitors.

Historic Brattonsville is a 775-acre historic site that tells the story of three generations of the Bratton family, located about thirty miles south of Charlotte in McConnells, South Carolina. First settled in the mid-1700s by Colonel William Bratton, the landscape includes three homesteads and historic structures dating from the 1760s through the late nineteenth century. Two locations on the property were particularly well-suited for interpreting slavery, but doing so challenged long-held beliefs and romantic stories associated with the Bratton family.

At the Colonel William Bratton House, located on the eighteenth-century side of the site, the story of Watt proved particularly difficult to overcome and transform in my efforts to interpret the history of slavery. Watt was an enslaved man owned by the colonel and his wife, Martha. Over time, Watt came to represent a romantic view of the relationship between slave owners and enslaved people. According to family lore, Watt “saved” the family during the Battle of Huck’s Defeat (1780). Watt supposedly alerted Col. Bratton, a leader of the New Acquisition Militia, about the presence of British captain Christian Huck at his home. Watt’s warning enabled the colonel and his group to surprise Huck and deliver a striking blow to the British Army during the Revolutionary War. Watt was rewarded for his loyalty. Though never freed by the Bratton family, he was supposedly never asked to work again. He and his wife are the only persons enslaved by the Brattons whose graves are marked. The tombstone is engraved as follows: “Sacred to the memory of WATT, who died December 1837. During the War he served his master Col. W. Bratton faithfully and his children with the same fidelity until his death. Also Polly, his wife who died July 1838 who served the family with the same faithfulness.”

The story of Watt is complicated. On the one hand, I found it rewarding to have a “hero” figure to highlight for visitors. On its surface, the story of Watt is the story of a brave man who, rather than running away, decided to save the family responsible for his enslavement. Watt understood the danger posed by the arrival of the British. He could have aided them in attacking the Bratton family. He could have grabbed his wife, Polly, and run away as the British “searched” for the colonel, securing freedom. On the other hand, I also had to explain why, in return for such bravery, the Bratton family did not grant
Watt his freedom. The idea that Watt remained a “loyal slave,” satisfied with “never having to work again,” made it appear that the colonel and his wife were benevolent owners. In truth, the story itself is questionable. The only documentation we have is the tombstone and receipts from its purchase. We do not have any direct evidence of Watt’s actions or his motivations. Some oral histories suggest Watt did not live a life of leisure. Instead, he was moved to the position of overseer, responsible for forcing other enslaved people on the plantation to perform difficult work over many hours. Yet over time, the romantic version of the story has become central to the site interpretation and the visitor experience. It has shaped their understanding of the Brattons as “good” slave owners. But both the construction of the story through selective use of evidence and the serious questions raised in the story as told point to the need for deeper interpretive inquiry. Can first-person interpretation invite visitors to interrogate how meaning has been created and for what purpose? Ending the site tour with this “feel-good” story always left me a little unsettled. I never successfully reconciled the interpretation. Watt’s story provides a window into the constrained choices available to enslaved people trying to make an unbearable situation marginally better. Watt’s story might tell us something about his effort to claim some agency by taking a risk on the family that owned him. Perhaps he knew that the family valued loyalty more than anything else, and he understood that his loyalty would be rewarded in some fashion. Was this a way to keep his family together? Was the story false? Was it merely an interpretive trick to make slavery palatable for visitors? In hindsight, I do wish that I engaged visitors with more discussion around Watt’s actions and raised questions about the conversations he might have had with Polly or other members of the enslaved community, especially after he learned of his “reward.” The story of Watt represents a crossroads where many enslaved men and women arrived: duty to owners or duty to self? Exploring more deeply the diversity of enslaved people’s experiences may have helped visitors understand why some ran away while others stayed put.

Visitors also encounter the history of slavery at Historic Brattonsville in the 1820s buildings associated with Col. Bratton’s son, Dr. John S. Bratton. Dr. Bratton’s home has been restored along with various outbuildings, including a reproduction brick kitchen, original and reproduction brick slave cabins, wooden barns, and workspaces. At the time of his death in 1843, Dr. Bratton held 139 men, women, and children in bondage. I interpreted their lives, stationed in the reproduction brick slave cabin. My job was made more
challenging by a variety of inaccuracies on the landscape. For example, the reproduction cabin was constructed with bricks. It had raised wooden floors, whitewashed walls, and glass windows. The average visitor walking into this space is surprised; this is not the wooden cabin with a dirt floor one tended to associate with the experience of slavery. By comparison to that stereotype, the cabins on the Bratton property suggested to visitors that the family must have been benevolent. I explained that it was economics, not benevolence. The Brattons had a brickyard on site, so bricks were plentiful and inexpensive. The Brattons likely ordered construction of brick cabins around the main house because it was more aesthetically pleasing and because the brick cabins demonstrated their wealth. Further, the fact that bricks were not a common material used to construct quarters provided me with an opportunity to discuss the variety of accommodations inhabited by enslaved people, not just on the plantation but also throughout the southern states. Describing who lived in the brick cabins at this particular site allowed me to talk about the roles and living conditions of domestic and skilled slaves as opposed to those who performed agricultural work.

The presence of the cabins did create other opportunities for me to make the experience of enslaved people more visible on the landscape. Using documents and past interpretive history, I discovered that the brick cabins more than likely had small plots for gardening. I asked for permission to create an interpretive garden, growing vegetables that might have been present in a slave garden. In the process of tilling the plot of land for the garden, we found a few bricks buried that had the handprints of the individual who made them. It was a powerful discovery. Indentations like this gave me and visitors direct material evidence of the Black people who had lived, worked, gardened, and made homes on this landscape. Between the bricks and the vegetation, this space became the place where my best interpretation occurred and where interactions with visitors flourished. I was able to talk about the diet of the enslaved. I recall talking to a brother and sister who were interested in what I was doing but were very nervous to talk to me. I engaged the parents with an overall description of the different vegetables that were growing and asked the kids if they liked to eat their vegetables. I explained how the children their age that might live in the cabin next to the garden may not have had vegetables to eat and were given rations of pork and cornmeal. The children would be excited to have something different to go with their pork and cornmeal and probably valued what could be done with vegetables. This
opened the eyes of the visitors and helped them think about how important variation to the slave diet was. Conducting interpretation in the third person was crucial because it allowed me to find ways to relate the past to the present, whether by describing the possibility that enslaved people could have visited family on the weekends or by working in the garden. I could break down historical barriers and make it possible for the visitor to be engaged with me in the present as I explained the past.

Working in the garden, I was able to make connections with visitors based on what was growing. It was easiest when a visitor who loved gardening approached me. They often wanted to know not only what I was growing but also about methods of pest control and other techniques of gardening. Many talked about the various deer repellants, electric fences, and sprays they used to keep animals away from their plants, and I described historical techniques for protecting the garden. Creating connections between the work of the enslaved and the hobbies of visitors allowed those coming to the site to recognize the slave community as human and relatable. It helped break down monolithic views of slavery as cotton fields and brutality and opened up opportunities to describe slaves as people operating within a system of oppression. I had similar experiences during cooking demonstrations, whether I was preparing food over a fire outside the cabin or in the brick kitchen at the hearth. During cooking demonstrations, visitors were able to make connections not just to the food but to everyday experiences related to domestic labor and family. Visitors asked about methods of cooking, and those who enjoyed camping were particularly interested in preparing food over a fire. Others marveled at the necessity of preparing food without a recipe and with heavy tools such as cast-iron pots and Dutch ovens.

Most of the visitors with whom I interacted were members of school groups from the surrounding areas of North and South Carolina. The educational programming at the site was designed to supplement classroom lessons on the Revolutionary War, the history of Scotch-Irish settlers in the area, and the antebellum South. While textbooks and teachers tended to associate slavery with cotton, I found that students were quite willing to learn about the complexity of slavery, and they responded to my interpretation with appropriate questions and respectful curiosity. Only a few instances made me pause, like when one African American girl, about nine years old, asked me to speak in dialect. For the most part, however, students understood the deep injustice of slavery and the lack of rights for the enslaved. They could
handle nuanced conversations about those who lived on the property, including three generations of slaveholders. Sitting in the reproduction brick cabin, the students heard about varying living conditions for those who worked in and around the main house and those who worked in the fields (and in the “stereotypical” log cabins). They learned about the responsibilities of the enslaved cook and her likely morning routine as well as the responsibilities of a blacksmith, farmhand, and fieldworker. By the time students left the site, they had arrived at a deeper understanding of slavery, what it meant for not only those who lived through it but those who came after them. It gave them a look into the issues of our country that they might not get from home, school, or the news and it was the type of education I hoped that more sites would provide as the narrative around slavery changed.

However, not all the interpretive experiences created successful moments of connection. Often I had to navigate a landscape that included racism that manifested itself largely because of what I was interpreting and where I was doing the work. Visitors asked if they could “buy” me, and they inquired about my skill set in order to put a price on me. Some insinuated that I should be in the kitchen making food for White patrons or that I should be serving visitors when I was on-site doing general interpretation. Even more disturbing were the comments I received from some volunteers when I entered the homestead through the front doors instead of going around to the back. One colleague was against my having receipt books or site information on the grounds because “slaves could not read.” My White coworkers were discouraged from assisting me in the slave garden because it would not be “historically accurate” to have someone White working alongside a slave. These things occurred despite the fact that we were doing third-person interpretation on site. I was told that only African Americans should talk about slavery and anything to do with African Americans on the site. I once had to apologize to a visitor who a coworker sent across the plantation to ask me about my clothes, despite the fact that I was wearing the same thing she was. These micro- and macroaggressions didn’t make it difficult to do the work, but they did make it infuriating to work collaboratively with my White colleagues. There were very few whom I could sit side by side with anywhere on site to do necessary sewing or cooking, or to generally interact with without feeling as if they were wishing I was their property. It became infuriating to work with colleagues who were unwilling to talk about the slave population because they insisted it was a job only I could do. Meanwhile, I was required
to know the entire history of the Bratton family, as well as the history of their enslaved population. Eventually the attitudes of these staff members and volunteers made me decide that I didn’t need to work in a racist environment that was not open to fully inclusive interpretation.

Every experience, though, is an opportunity to learn and explore the challenges and wins in the interpretation of slavery, so while things may have been difficult toward the end of my time at Brattonsville, I was able to take those experiences and use them as a framework for helping other sites improve their interpretation of slavery. A few things became clear to me. First, it is crucial for staff and administrators to fully integrate the interpretation of slavery; the work should not fall solely on African American interpreters. Second, site directors must be sensitive to the fact that the history of slavery has a particular emotional weight, and African American interpreters need support, particularly in our current political climate. While I did have support from my leadership team at Brattonsville, there was no direct effort to address the use of racially insensitive language by coworkers and volunteers. Strong leadership can help change the culture on site. Third, regular staff training is essential for creating a sense of command and comfort necessary for interpreting difficult narratives. Before my departure, I asked for and received permission to create and conduct interpretive training for my White colleagues. I walked them through a newly created site tour that focused on the experience of African Americans. The tour looked at slavery in both the colonial and antebellum periods and touched on the difference between the two eras. It was designed to guide interpreters in discussing the slave population with visitors, whether they were officially giving a tour or not. The interpretive guide included information about how to have appropriate interactions and how, specifically, to work with students. After I left the site, I remained in contact with coworkers who had been supportive of me and had been willing to expand their interpretive “territory.” They shared with me their experiences in interpreting the slave stations during field trips. I am proud to know that they continued to engage students especially in the interpretation of slavery. They did not report any incidents of visitors taking offense, nor have they been asked about their ability—as White people—to interpret slavery.

It would have been possible for an interpreter to leave a position at the site without offering a suggested solution to the lack of Black interpretive staff. But I felt a sense of mission and commitment to the site’s history, to
the enslaved men, women, and children I had represented, to their descendants (who are still connected to the site), and to the countless visitors who had asked me questions about the enslaved people who lived there. I was worried about what would happen to the interpretation when I left, especially because my mentor on site, Miss Kitty Wilson Evans, had retired shortly after I arrived. She too was concerned about what would happen to the interpretation. She knew that the story had to continue to be told. I was happy to be able to carry on her legacy and to provide a way for the story to continue after my departure.

**On My Own**

When I left Brattonsville, I continued to work to improve the interpretation of slavery by maintaining a blog and by doing freelance consulting. I also became an active and frequent presenter on the subject of slavery interpretation at various conferences, including the National Council on Public History and the American Association of State and Local History. This work led to my involvement in both organizations as part of various committees. I also began to network with other people dedicated to changing the narrative. Kristin Gallas and James DeWolf Perry invited me to be an author in the book *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*. I wrote about the role that race and perception play in how interpretation is given and received. I have consulted with sites looking to expand their interpretation as well as train

Courtesy of Nicole A. Moore.
staff on interacting with visitors as these changes take place. I find the most joy in doing presentations and training simply because I’ve been there, and I understand some of the struggles as well as some of the joyous moments where interpreters share the wins they’ve had. Whether it’s the guest who decided to challenge everything the interpreter says until they’ve been presented with information so intriguing they are rendered speechless or those moments when descendants stop by and share family history—all of it makes this job of sharing a “difficult narrative” worth it.

Recently, I have had the honor of being a part of Inalienable Rights: Living History through the Eyes of the Enslaved. I first met Joseph McGill when he wanted to conduct a Slave Dwelling stay at Historic Brattonsville in 2011. Brattonsville would be the first time that he connected with the descendants of the enslaved and told them of the project and why he wanted to honor their ancestors in this particular way. We have been finding ways to work together ever since. Inalienable Rights participants accompany Joe during some of the many sleepovers he holds across the country where a slave dwelling is present. While I do not work for a living history site anymore, participating has allowed me to take part in interpretive demonstrations, educating the public on the lives of the enslaved one site at a time. My role as a cook has allowed me to connect to a variety of audiences—surprisingly, many young White males, who are captivated by my cooking over a fire. They can relate to the methods from their camping trips with either family or scout troops and are often interested in the foodways of enslaved African Americans simply because the food had to be done over a fire. They’re interested in the utensils used, from knives to the wooden spoons; the dishes we eat off; and the meats that are prepared because they can relate to working under similar food circumstances. For older southerners, the use of fatback reminds them of their grandmother’s kitchen, and for those who grew up not having a lot monetarily, the meager rations of the enslaved echo many a meal for them. Most of these audience members openly admit to not knowing much about the enslaved other than what they might have seen on television or learned about in school, and when they watch a demonstration, they see that to an extent, their life experiences mirror those of the enslaved. No longer is this population less than human; they are very real and the history becomes tangible, and the walls that create “othering” come down. As a member of the board of directors for the Slave Dwelling Project, it’s my self-imposed duty to ensure that the interpretive work continues to be a large part of what we
do as an organization while conducting the moments of reflection and reconcili-
ciation that take place during every overnight stay.

**Taking Care**

Despite all the joy that being a public historian who gets to actually do the
work of their thesis brings, there is the very real side of knowing when to
take a break and take care of yourself. Embodying slavery and interpre-
ting it in various forms takes a very real toll on you mentally. Beginning this
work when Barack Obama was newly in the White House was interesting
enough—having to hear from people who said, “We have a Black president,
is this necessary?”—and in the era and immediate aftermath of the Donald
Trump presidency, it can feel like this work is a matter of life or death. There
is a real danger in doing this work now because you have no idea who you’re
going to get or what reaction you’re going to get. However, now more than
ever I find it important to challenge those who want to ignore this facet of
history as we hear rhetoric that historically has had dire consequences for
people of color. But the mental health of all who take part in this work has
to come first.

Nicole Moore, costumed cooking demonstration. Courtesy of Nicole A. Moore.
When working with sites now, for those that do have African Americans carrying this load, I remind their White colleagues that they need to be the ones to step in and protect their coworkers from abusive visitors and to check their own privilege. It’s so easy to go home at night when you do not physically reflect the enslaved community, yet for those of us who wear this costume called the skin I’m in, some days can be demoralizing. At the 2017 Carolina Lowcountry and Atlantic World Conference, I had the pleasure of participating in a panel discussion featuring three other African American women, all of us public historians. Dr. Ashley Bouknight, Elon Cook Lee, Sara Daise, and I discussed the struggles we’ve encountered in this profession—the resistance to change, the micro- and macroaggressions we’ve faced from colleagues, blatant racism, and the pain that comes from doing this work. Yet we all are still very much dedicated to recognizing and teaching our history. The session, for me, ended up being the therapy I needed. I had no idea how much I had been holding in, the hurt I’d experienced, and the abuse that I’d dismissed. I realized that I had been used by other public historians who looked to promote themselves but hesitated to give the same energy, effort, and resources to those they drained in the process. It also gave me the sense of community that I missed out on during my tenure as an on-site interpreter. Elon felt it was necessary for Black interpreters to have a space to call their own where we could connect, talk, vent, or just uplift one another, and she had the foresight to create the Black Interpreters Guild, a community on Facebook that has included Google Hangouts, conference meetups, and sincere good vibes. She described the group as “a space for Black/African American museum, historic house or historic site interpreters to learn, share stories and resources, encourage each other and build a supportive nationwide community. We are not alone.” It has been so important for many of us to have this community in which to share our experiences and come together, especially when it is very easy to feel alone.

From an unexpected beginning in a simple class assignment, I have built a career that I don’t see slowing down any time soon. I can affirmatively say that I don’t regret my earlier decision to not fully study slavery when teachers kept insisting I do it. Coming into the subject in my own time and my own way has kept me open to learning more while doing the work necessary to educate the public. Even as my day job at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights pulls me into the twentieth and twenty-first century, I have not stopped consulting with sites or presenting on this extremely important work. I don’t think
I'll stop doing the work until sites like Whitney Plantation in Louisiana—where the story of enslaved people is at the center of site interpretation—are the rule and not the exception and until Black interpreters aren't largely the only ones responsible for sharing the narrative. I was meant to do this, and finding purpose in the work has allowed me the opportunity to not just engage thousands of people over the years but truly appreciate who I am, whose I am, and where my own history lies. This descendant of slaves will continue to interpret slave life and tell the stories that are finally being heard.

Notes

8 Moore, “Presenting Slave Life.”