11-2006

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Recommended Citation

Ashton, Susanna. 2006. "Texts of Our Institutional Lives: Don't You Mean 'Slaves,' Not 'Servants'?: Literary and Institutional Texts for an Interdisciplinary Classroom". *College English*. 69 (2): 156-172.

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I TEXTS OF OUR INSTITUTIONAL LIVES: “Don’t You Mean ‘Slaves,’ Not ‘Servants’?”: Literary and Institutional Texts for an Interdisciplinary Classroom

Susanna Ashton

EDITOR’S NOTE: This article begins a semiregular feature in which contributors analyze “texts” that figure in the daily lives of college English teachers: e.g., syllabi, course descriptions, administrative decrees, departmental bylaws, college Web sites. Your proposals are invited. Here, Susanna Ashton describes how undergraduates in her class on representations of slavery studied the words, sounds, and images they encountered at a historical site on her campus: the former slave plantation of leading antebellum racist John C. Calhoun. She also analyzes how her school depicts this site on the Web. In effect, she raises the issue of how any college might teach about ignoble aspects of its past.

I teach at Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina, a fairly large public research university with a land-grant mission. We are often mistaken for a private university both because of the beauty of our campus and also because of the simplicity of our name, which disguises our public status. Clemson University was named after Thomas Green Clemson, an intriguingly complex statesman, scientist, and public figure who bequeathed this land to the people of South Carolina. Thomas Clemson was raised a Quaker in the Northeast but married into one of the South’s most famous (or infamous) families and here, for me, is where the story begins. For when Thomas Green Clemson deeded his property in order to found a “seminary of higher learning,” he was bequeathing the cotton plantation of John C. Calhoun (1782–1850), statesman (senator, Secretary of War, Secretary of State, and two-term vice president of the United States, etc.), staunch patriot, proud racist, and perhaps the single most influential antebellum proponent of nullification, essentially the right of states to resist federal mandates—primarily to block federal taxation and to maintain slavery. Our university sits on what was a huge

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plantation property and was founded, indeed, upon the spoils of forced labor.¹ Few students, faculty, staff, or members of the community at large have any idea of this fact, despite the fact that in the very center of our campus is Fort Hill—the home built by John C. Calhoun’s slaves.

Of course, there are many universities and colleges that share a painful history or have an institutional legacy that may be troubling. And, frankly, I can think of nothing better than having a public university that is open to *all* built on the homestead of one of the men responsible for defending slavery.² Nonetheless, I am not writing about the history of Clemson University or John C. Calhoun *per se*. Rather, I wish to report on an interdisciplinary course I taught at Clemson entitled *Representations of Slavery*. This seminar was inspired by my own complicated feelings about teaching an increasingly diverse student body at a forward-thinking institution that sometimes seems so intent on modernizing and moving toward national status that it looks back selectively, rather than candidly or broadly, at the history it embodies. No one at Clemson denies the presence of the Fort Hill house or the legacy of John C. Calhoun specifically, but general ignorance ensures that Calhoun’s complicated legacy isn’t widely known.

Now it is important to know that, while Fort Hill is in the epicenter of campus—essentially in the heart of the space between the University Union and the classroom buildings—it is landscaped in such a way that it simply isn’t that visible. Lush trees and bushes almost completely block the view of the building from the sides and the back and, while the building is visible from the front, it is raised on a slight hill that effectively separates it from the perambulations of students. Whether this is an accident or by design I cannot say, but the result is that when I had to tell students to meet me in front of the Fort Hill building, most of them did not know where it was, even though they had walked by it at least twice a week for three months to get to my class.

The pictures of Fort Hill posted by the university helped me further develop a curriculum that would probe how a university text might be imagined. The photographs used for the university’s official Web site show the Fort Hill mansion from sightlines that are largely unrestricted (although I maintain that these attractive unrestricted sightlines require one to be “off the beaten path” of regular pedestrian traffic; see Fig. 1). Far more significant, however, are the ways in which the university’s public presentation of Fort Hill and the legacy of slavery it represents are encapsulated or performed by its relevant Web sites. Clemson University has a number of Web pages delineating the history of the university, the Calhoun and Clemson families, and the Fort Hill plantation. The pages reveal what I earlier termed Clemson University’s “forward-thinking” sensibility as well as an increasing sensitivity to the university’s complex history. Nonetheless, as texts they merit interrogation for their crafted nature and vexed import.

Figure 1. Fort Hill, from the Clemson University website. Used with permission.

The story they tell is, first and foremost, the story of Thomas Green Clemson, the donor of Fort Hill and the university founder. That isn't surprising, of course, but it not only effectively reduces the presence of John C. Calhoun's legacy, but also obscures the specific nature of the Calhoun plantation. My claim might not be so persuasive if Thomas Clemson had not himself

willed the "Fort Hill place," which he specifically identifies as "formerly the home of my father-in-law, John C. Calhoun." While delineating the history of Thomas Clemson himself and how his vision of an agricultural and scientific college was to be founded and organized dominates the Clemson Web site history, the fact that it was to be centered on a physical area Thomas Clemson identified primarily as his dead father-in-law's is telling of how Clemson himself was all too aware of how small his role in both South Carolina and national history was, in comparison with that of John C. Calhoun.³

The primary Fort Hill website maintained by the university does little to explain the history of the home beyond its significance as the antebellum mansion of Clemson and Calhoun. Links to other university-sponsored websites, however, express some of the contradictory context about institutional history that first fueled my interest and, I hoped, would fuel the interest of my students.

There is, to be fair, a link to the history of African Americans at Fort Hill, the text of which forms a brochure that has been out of print for some years (a fact which is telling in and of itself). The essay is a reasonable overview of the African American experience at Fort Hill but it is somewhat buried and there are certainly some narrative moments that merit interrogation (as we shall see later in *this* essay in the comments of one of my students). This segregated history, inasmuch as it is clearly separate from the "official" history of the home, indicates an attempt or a gesture toward inclusive or multiple histories but by mere proximity is in conversation with other, less inclusive texts as embodied in other official links.

Also linked to the front page of the Fort Hill Web site are photographs of the Fort Hill's 2003 Grand Reopening and Bicentennial Celebration. The fifty-six photographs show an overwhelmingly white audience listening to various speakers and young women in hoop skirts stationed decorously throughout the festivities (see

Fig. 2). Of course these photographs do not indicate a definitive demographic or sociological truth about the role of the Fort Hill site, but they do contribute to an institutional text that invokes a romantic nostalgia of a bygone era. As one of my students later pointed out to me when viewing these photographs (and after having heard a lecture by a professor of costume design), these crinoline costumes decisively indicate a historical period of the late 1840s to 1860s. Fort Hill was built in 1803 and Calhoun lived there from 1825 until his death in 1850, while Thomas Clemson moved there full-time in 1872 and lived there until his death in 1888. Thus the costumes could have been aptly chosen to represent the close-fitted Empire styles of the 1820s or the bustled styles of the Reconstruction era. Instead, the Fort Hill mansion was celebrated with a romanticized aesthetic nod specifically to its Calhoun era that was, coincidentally or not, the era during which the slave population at Fort Hill was at its height. The pictures evoke a typical, albeit uncalculated, institutional narrative of historic nostalgia, upper-class gentility, and the complete absence of enslaved peoples anywhere in the official history of the site or the university. These digital texts don't provide damning or laudatory evidence for anything specific or, if they do, I don't see it as my job to laud or damn anything. Nonetheless, as a scholar and teacher of narrative, I saw how the university's Fort Hill story might be creatively integrated into a class about the contradictory and complex rhetoric of representations of the slave era.

Figure 2. A greeter in antebellum costume during the Fort Hill Grand Reopening and Bicentennial Celebration in April 2003, from the Clemson University website. Used with permission.

THE REPRESENTATIONS OF SLAVERY COURSE

Now to my 2005 Representations of Slavery course. Because this seminar (titled, without irony, Calhoun Honors College Seminar on Society, Arts, and the Humanities) was part of the Honors College and separate from any individual department, it attracted students from all majors and from first- to fourth-year. I had no English majors, only one history major, and two or three majors in the traditional arts and sciences fields (economics, psychology, math, biology); the bulk of my students were honor students in engineering, education, and the applied sciences (packaging sci-

ence, etc.). There were only three minority students in the class. I mention all this so that when I get to a discussion of their final reactions to their Fort Hill fieldwork, you have a bit of a context for their invocation of literary terms and for their varying levels of critical analysis.

More context: Two years ago I took a previous Representations of Slavery class on a field trip to Charleston, South Carolina, where we visited several disappointing sites. We toured sites at which inaccurate information was given out about the nature of the crops grown (several tour guides seemed unaware of the history of slave manufacture of indigo dye in South Carolina, for example) and about slave demographics (we were told at some sites that the average slave holding in the United States was several hundred slaves, and while this might have been true for a couple of intensively cultivated rice fields in the low countries it certainly wasn't true for any broader region; slaves in the United States were, on average, held in groups of under twenty individuals); most of all, we listened to tour guides tell us as little as possible about slavery unless it reflected well upon the enslavers (for example: "So-and-so was known as a kind master, and many of his slaves actually stayed with his family even after the war!"). Neither I nor my students were prepared for these spectacular omissions from the tour narratives, and, although we occasionally asked questions, we were mostly dumbfounded and submissive to the master narratives of the cheerful and always gracious guides. At our third plantation site, however, one of my students finally took a stand: "Don't you mean 'slaves,' not 'servants'?" she asked the guide.⁴ As our guide searched for words to answer her, I silently congratulated her for having challenged the story as it was presented and I vowed to equip my students in the future with productive tools so that we might better learn why the terminology might matter and, even more important, so that we might better learn why all of our social coding had kept the entire class silent as we listened to a history of "servants" at three sites up until that moment. Thus, in the spring of 2005, when I got a second chance to teach this special interdisciplinary honors class, I created a different Representations of Slavery syllabus, which achieved the goal of empowering such questions but nonetheless got to that point in surprising ways.

The class began with three solid weeks of debunking general misconceptions about slavery by reading through a variety of historical analyses. Peter Kolchin's *American Slavery 1619-1877* was a crucial text, as were essays in *Slavery in American Society* (Goodheart, Brown, and Rabe) by writers such as Lawrence Levine, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Herbert Gutman. Of course, like any good history, the information we gained made life more complicated rather than less. We learned to be careful about generalizations, since slavery varied so much from region to region, not to mention from century to century. My students learned to be acutely aware of regional differences, and throughout the rest of our semester I was pleased to hear them ask and note *where* any particular depiction of slavery might have come from.

They became increasingly sensitive to noting differences between slavery as practiced in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries in North America and they became comfortable with recalling both the practice of slavery in the North and the many antislavery voices in the South. We then moved into slave narratives by reading Frederick Douglass's 1845 narrative and then Harriet Jacobs's autobiographical novel, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—both texts that gave us many critical and analytical tools later used during our Fort Hill experiences. I screened a BBC-TV documentary titled *Digging for Slaves* about archeological explorations into how slavery is represented by artifacts and *Ethnic Notions*, a documentary focusing particularly upon the creation and dissemination of derogatory and racist stereotypes. We heard speakers from performing arts give lectures on subjects such as representations of slave clothing (the research specialty of one of our professors of costume design) and on the soundscape of slavery and its legacy—from field calls and spirituals to jazz and contemporary rap and world music (the interest of another colleague). A professor from the history department visited to disabuse anyone of notions about the South's justifications for the Civil War (he did this wonderfully by distributing and asking the class to collectively analyze the actual declarations of secession from various Southern states, almost all of which named the right to own slaves as the fundamental right they sought to protect, in their opening paragraphs.) Then we began to move toward filmic and literary representations. We spent a number of class sessions on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) to get a good sense of the sentimental rhetoric informing nineteenth-century abolitionist discourse, and I included analysis of mixed black abolitionist and mixed Southern responses to the novel. We had a class session devoted to reading and analyzing selected interviews with ex-slaves conducted in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration. These interviews with elderly people who had actually lived through slavery both confirmed and contested many of the issues we'd encountered in our other texts, but also raised great problems of how transmissions work. My students thus spent a lot of time critiquing the interviewing process itself and imagining what might have been at stake for the elderly ex-slaves and how they chose to represent their experiences. With all this under our belts, we then moved into consideration of *Roots*, *Amistad*, and the film version of *Beloved* as crucial visual texts. We rounded out these central units of the course with two weeks devoted to discussion of the contemporary novels *Property* (2003), by Valerie Martin, and *Middle Passage* (1998), by Charles Johnson.

BEFORE AND AFTER THE VISIT TO FORT HILL

Thus, as we prepared for our final class unit, which was to focus on Fort Hill, I figured my students had a strong interdisciplinary grounding in the field—but as the last class unit loomed, I began to really wonder what this “field” was.

The shaping of the final class unit was directly inspired by Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small's research as presented in *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (2002). I had left that first trip to Charleston frustrated not only by how shallow those tours were but also by how few tools my students and I had had with which to effectively dissect them. Thus, when I later read the Eichstedt and Small book, I immediately saw it as a resource for analytical strategies we might use on a field trip for the second incarnation of my Representations of Slavery class. This book, a splendid and engaging fieldwork study, was written by sociologists, and many of their approaches were thus deeply shaped in what was, to me, an unfamiliar discipline. Nonetheless, knowing that many of my students were majoring in hard science, applied science, and social science fields, I thought that designing what would essentially be a small sociology project in the class might be an appealing and productive proposition.

Eichstedt and Small went on hundreds of tours of plantation museums and houses. They also sent teams of graduate students to sites to take notes, procure books and videos, and generally collect as much data as they could about how the history of American slavery was presented at those sites. The authors construct a typology of primary representational and discursive strategies, which they find they can apply to most sites they visit. These categories were:

- Symbolic annihilation and the erasure of slavery (essentially ignoring the presence of enslaved people in the history of a site).
- Trivialization and deflection of the experience of enslavement (referring to slavery uncritically as a neutral practice or one that is only significant inasmuch as it reveals something about the enslavers).
- Segregated knowledge (providing information about slavery as a separate tour or one which is subsidiary to the "official" tour.)
- Relative incorporation of ideas that might counter a master narrative (thoughtful and integrated presentation of historical information that includes discussion of the slave experience).

I don't have the space to delineate in any detail the array of sharp observational strategies employed by Eichstedt and Small, but at least *some* of them came in the form of observing the language used by the tour guides (such as listening for when the passive voice was used to discuss slave labor, or noticing whether slaves were called "slaves" or "servants"), noting the ways in which stories or accounts of site history were presented (Were they invoked solely to illustrate what a kind master the plantation owner was?), noting how the physical space and sites were experienced by visitors (Were the slave cabins or living quarters open to visitors?), observing how much time was spent on various topics (How much time was spent on furniture and how much on people? How many mentions of famous statesmen were

there versus references to women?) and observing also how the apparati (brochures, videos, souvenirs, plaques, advertisements, etc.) also shaped the story of slavery as told on the site.

As an English professor, I was first engaged by attention to language. And, after reading the bulk of the book, my students happily made a list of things they would listen for. We brainstormed a series of specific tasks for each student on the tour. One student would, with a stop watch, do his best to time the discussion of architecture. Others would time the discussions of furniture, politics, agriculture, and slavery. One student was to take particular note of the gestures and body language of the guides. One student was going to attend to how much time was spent on the antebellum as opposed to the equally complicated postbellum history of the site. Every student had at least one specific task in hand. It was beginning to look like a splendid plan.

I realized as the time got closer and I scheduled my visit, however, that there was no way this field trip would be a well-designed sociological study, particularly if any of the results of the work

were to be made public. To begin with, we were all too close to the site. That is to say, we couldn't (or, more specifically, I couldn't) in good conscience "set up" the handful of guides at Fort Hill who had agreed to take my class around, by not telling them that one of the things we would be listening for in their texts would be their own biases and omissions. Furthermore I feared that comments the students might

Figure 3. Photograph of Fort Hill by Susanna Ashton. Used with permission.

make after the fact would be so harsh, in their desire to be critical, that it might disrespect the goodwill of the curators. Or, even if the critiques were profoundly fair and constructive, they still might seem hurtful or disrespectful when made public, and that might limit their implementation or simply render my own professional relationships with the Clemson administration or Fort Hill staff awkward. Since I hoped to write up an article about our and their experiences and possibly even a list of recommendations for our university about how it might better use the resources of this truly significant and remarkable site, I wanted my students to be both respectful and tactful.

One of my primary concerns was that I didn't want to shut down intellectual inquiry with easy dismissals. I told the class that if they went through the tour with a prepared mental checklist of "racist actions" and a condescending attitude toward the guides or the materials, they were going at it in an unproductive way. I lectured to the class that, while the guides were doubtless shaping their version of history according to the contexts of their own experiences (which might possibly render their views offensive in other contexts), we'd be better off focusing not upon the guides and their responsibility for symbolic annihilation, trivialization, segregated knowledge, or even relative incorporation, as Eichstedt and Small's categories might suggest, but instead upon how our broader culture had made it acceptable for the guides to deliver history in the way they did.

Moreover, I wondered whether it was really fair to come in as a class without telling the Fort Hill staff what our primary expertise and interest was. As one of my students asked, "Would the guide feel punk'd?" When making the initial appointment I had told Fort Hill staff that the class was a class in nineteenth-century American culture, but I hadn't told them we were specifically a class analyzing cultural representations of slavery. If I were later to publish anything relating to this site, I'd feel dreadful for having tricked them, and I even began to worry about whether or not I should have had the entire project approved by the university's Institutional Review Board for working with human subjects.

Nonetheless, while it was in keeping with what I felt to be collegial and professional, I realized, as soon as I gave it, that my lecture on field-trip etiquette had, in some ways, failed the more responsible tenets of scholarly inquiry. I was telling students that certain reactions were not permissible. I was, on one hand, asking them to make observations and, on the other hand, to shape their observations only in a way that I found acceptable. I began to reflect upon how I was failing the Eichstedt and Small project. Not that Eichstedt and Small had encouraged disrespect or name calling, but they had obviously worked hard to pull no punches when it came to describing what they powerfully termed, for example, symbolic annihilation.

Most of all, I suddenly was facing the most obvious pedagogical conflict of all—should I allow students to ask questions? Questions might well alter the presentation of the Fort Hill narrative. The students had, in a class brainstorming session, made a list of questions they wanted to ask—we had considered planting questions like "What are the demographics of your visitors? Are they mostly Clemson parents? Civil War buffs?" Students also wanted to ask about how many slaves had been there and whether or not they had stayed on as sharecroppers after the war. They wanted to know where the slaves had lived and if there had been any runaways. Some students hoped to ask more about John C. Calhoun's legal and political arguments concerning slavery, and others wanted to know the proportions of house slaves to field slaves. Yet other students wanted to know whether this plantation had been

run on a task-based work system or not. I couldn't answer most of these questions myself and was thus excited to hear what the answers would be. However, I then realized that any and certainly all of these questions would significantly alter the experience of the tour. We wouldn't be getting the "standard tour of Fort Hill" and wouldn't be in a position to assess what information was available or shared with visitors who didn't express a particular interest in slavery.

Two days before we went . . . I threw up my hands and decided to stop pretending to be a sociologist or an anthropologist. Interdisciplinary work may be laudable, but this project reminded me that I needed to show those fields a little more respect before assuming that I and my students could jump right in.

So we proceeded with the project, but much more haphazardly and informally than I had planned. I still didn't emphasize to the head curator and the guide who took us around that we were a "slavery class" but I did tell him that we had read a great deal about slavery and nineteenth-century culture. I allowed and encouraged students to ask as many questions as they wanted and I, too, peppered the tour guide with questions about the site and the communities and individuals who had sustained it for so many years. While students still took down careful observations and wrote up mini-reports and reactions for me, their data was absurdly subjective, and useless by any formal fieldwork standards.

On the other hand, as I first reviewed their mini-reports and then read their more lengthy analyses of Fort Hill in their final exams, I began to realize that many of the tools they had acquired as close readers and literary scholars had influenced their experiences of the site in surprising ways.

When we had read the narrative of Frederick Douglass, for instance, I had tried to mark out moments when I felt we were asking questions as historians and moments when I felt we were asking questions more as literary or cultural critics. (Of course, our discussion was largely marked by moments in which that differentiation was impossible.) Two of the textual moments I focused on were the opening paragraphs of Douglass's story and then the famous ellipsis when he doesn't describe his actual escape.

In a standard exercise I use for teaching Douglass, I had the students work through the first five paragraphs of the narrative without even paying attention to the meaning of the words in context. I had them simply note all the words they could find that indicated negativity, lack, absence, or loss. (They'd pull out dozens of examples such as "I have no accurate knowledge," "a want," "seldom," "not allowed," "I do not know," "never," "left me without" . . .) and only then would we go back to analyze how Douglass marked out a theme of how knowledge had been steadily denied him as a slave.

One of the things this exercise had apparently taught them (as also, no doubt, had the study of Eichstedt and Small) was that words, even when out of context,

merited attention. Indeed, several students seemed aware in their final exams that there was no such thing as “out of context.” One student, in class discussion, pointed out that as our tour guide discussed the various wills of the Calhoun family and how the estate had been left to relatives who then divided it up, the fact that “it” was land but also slaves meant that slaves had become “it.” While another student commented that that was hardly fair, because the “it” didn’t demonstrate callousness on the part of the tour guide, but instead demonstrated a basic grammatical habit of replacing a collective noun “estate” with a simple pronoun, the original student pointed out that context or conscious intent wasn’t very important. The fact was that we were hearing the word “it” and mentally replacing a notion of slaves with that word.

In another case, I had lectured in class about how various critical readers of Douglass’s narrative observed that the fact that Douglass didn’t include the story of his escape from slavery (surely the most tantalizing part of his life story) was more than just a way to protect those who had helped him and to possibly keep that method of escape open for future fugitives. Keeping readers out of the loop, as it were, was a brilliant way of rhetorically turning the tables on his audience, effectively putting the reader in the position of the slave denied knowledge.

In students’ responses to Fort Hill, I found their awareness of when they were left out of an information loop intriguing and unpredictable. In one instance, our guide showed us an outbuilding used as a kitchen and mentioned how at least some of the house slaves would likely have lived in the loft immediately above the kitchen. There was a ladder leading up to the loft but it was not open to the public. In their final reflections about their Fort Hill experiences, many of my students commented upon how much they wanted to see the loft, and how important it would be to open the loft to visitors and to impress upon people how different the house slave quarters would have been from the Calhoun family rooms. Now, of course, this may have simply been because my students liked the idea of climbing up a ladder, but in their reflections several of them commented that being excluded from the loft was frustrating and made them feel excluded—indeed, more than one student commented that missing out on the loft made them painfully aware of much they couldn’t ever know about the site, and one student even wrote that not seeing the loft made him feel like a “member of the Calhoun family” who would surely have avoided the loft whenever possible. So while my students were certainly responding as good historians, good empiricists, or good tourists (!) in simply wanting to see the loft, the language describing their emotive and theoretical responses was framed by some of the rhetorical markers of exclusion and ignorance as identified in our Douglass text.

Other moments that I think were informed more by our study of artistic representations than by our studies of history manifested themselves in surprising ways in student reflections upon the semester.

After seeing *Beloved*, for example, and discussing the role of sound and voices in the film, I read exam essays that suggested altering the Fort Hill tour experience by playing tapes of spirituals or even the few extant audio tapes of WPA narratives throughout the Fort Hill house. Not so much because they would share a bit of specific history but because they would remind people that—as one student put it—“voices are presences that are there and we don’t see, like slaves.” The omnipresent history of slavery could be imagined as an impressionistic soundscape.

We had spent class time analyzing the repeated phrase of *Beloved*: “This is not a story to pass on.” (After seeing the film we looked over excerpts of the novel, although, because of a last-minute scheduling complication, we were not able to read the novel in its entirety.) One student suggested a plaque be placed in front of Fort Hill that would similarly read “This is not a story to pass on”—playing on the history, the myth, and the physicality of the building itself.

Charles Johnson’s novel *Middle Passage* had provided us with rich material for historical and literary analysis as well. Johnson’s novel is a picaresque tale that concerns an ex-slave, conveniently named Calhoun, who accidentally finds himself aboard a slave ship and gets caught up in an uprising. One of the most brilliant devices Johnson deploys is the use of carefully placed anachronisms: he mentions Piltdown Man, and uses pat contemporary phrases such as “Never Explain, Never Apologize.” These anachronisms bothered the students at first, but once they engaged them as imaginative textual strategies and not as accidents on the part of Johnson, they came to work with them differently. I posed the notion to them that, for Johnson, slavery was less a specific historical incident than a psychological notion that transcended time. Many characters in the novel, for example, are enslaved in different ways from the individuals held in the belly of the boat. Some are characterized as enslaved by greed, by their sex, by society, by capitalism, by their own fears, or by their own philosophies. Seen in this way, the anachronisms broadened the impact of a slavery critique rather than weakening it; as the class came to appreciate, in some ways the anachronisms made the novel more relevant to their own experiences and not simply “less accurate.”

I was pleased and surprised to see some of this insight manifest itself in discussions of Fort Hill, for example when students laughed about how the guides had spent a lot of time discussing the accuracy of the reproduced wallpaper but seemed oblivious to the installation of fire extinguishers and sprinkler systems. This turned the class to a more serious discussion about accuracy. A young woman noted that the furniture displayed actually represented several different eras of family antique collecting and wasn’t entirely original to the house anyway. I agreed with her, but pointed out that in my own house I have old and new furniture. History can bleed from one era into another. And as for the anachronisms in the site presentation—before I

could say anything more, the mere word “anachronisms” (which I had had to define when I used it in discussion of *Middle Passage*) led the students to analyze the historical inconsistencies present in the Fort Hill site as literary anachronisms that had been deliberately inserted into the text, helping them bridge and relate to the site. Indeed, the anachronisms reminded visitors that slavery was a part of who they and we all are today. Who would have suspected that the juxtaposition of a sprinkler system and reproduced wallpaper could be an effective rhetorical technique?

Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* came up not only when students were discussing how much they had wanted to peep into the sleeping loft (which reminded more than one student of the attic hiding place where Jacobs’s alter ego, Linda, had hidden for seven years) but also during this discussion of anachronism. We had spent a lot of time in class talking about why Jacobs had shaped her work as a novel, not as an autobiography. Her mingling of autobiography and fiction was more than a mere pragmatic decision to bow to the social mores of the time, which would have prevented such a challenging life narrative from being published. In some ways, I had pointed out to the class, Jacobs was playing upon our notions of how fiction and truth were intertwined.

I was delighted to hear echoes of this discussion too reemerge when analyzing Fort Hill. A bright young man in my class laughed again at the discussion about anachronisms at the site and said it was just like when Jacobs mixed up her truth and her fiction. I wasn’t certain I fully understood him—how were anachronisms at Fort Hill a mixture of truth and fiction? Well, he replied, they were true to then and true to now, even though they were a lie about history. His answer wasn’t the answer of a historian or a sociologist, but it showed the influence of a literary scholar at work and I was happy to hear it.

Property, a recent novel by Valerie Martin, was written from the point of view of Manon, the wife of a wealthy slave owner. *Property* concerns Manon’s tormented relationship with her husband’s slave mistress, and the ways in which the culture of slavery was shaped by all of its participants. The novel gave the students lots to think about in terms of women’s points of view and, in some ways, led them to take notice of many things about Fort Hill that were essentially historically inflected questions—where did the female house slaves sleep, for example, was a question that more than one of my students brought up. Another student explicitly compared Floride Calhoun, John C. Calhoun’s young wife, who spent many months alone on the plantation without her husband, to Manon, the selfish but somewhat helpless protagonist of *Property*. One student even wondered whether Calhoun had a slave mistress or slave children himself. But the narrative techniques of the novel—which opens with far-off images of seeing slaves abused through a spyglass and is written entirely in the first person—made the students especially sensitive to the biased nature of all stories. The spy-glass is a powerful tool that simultaneously engages and distances Manon

from the abuse. This unappealing and callous protagonist, who seems so profoundly oblivious to the injustices around her, is such a case study in culturally constructed blindness that I think their responses indicated that it gave the students a heightened sense of how to imagine the Calhoun family living their life of privilege enabled by a system they couldn't imagine questioning.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FORT HILL SITE

Finally, I'd like to discuss how some of their final suggestions or wish lists for how to improve or develop the Fort Hill site also reflected as much literary as historical or sociological analysis. While many suggested practical changes, such as making more brochures Web-accessible, including African American tour guides, reprinting the one brochure that deals with the slave presence and that is currently out of print, and devoting more tour time simply to recounting the ways in which a plantation was worked, other of their suggestions included notions that were more about narrative shaping than about historical information per se. For example:

- Provide a map: Put an outdoor podium in front of Fort Hill with a map of the plantation and its many outbuildings as they would have existed in the 1840s. This would necessarily include the slave cabins, and while no commentary or written analysis would be necessary that might distress the Clemson boosters or administrators who might fear engaging the public with the true history of the plantation, it would quietly and yet incontrovertibly make a statement about our shared past.
- Employ individual names: One student suggested that individual names be used whenever possible. Our guide mentioned one woman, Susan, who had worked for the Calhoun family, but the names of many of the other slaves are on record and so refer to them as individuals whenever possible—even if in a speculative way such as “We assume that since, say, ‘Birdy’ was a cook, she and her husband, say, ‘Caesar Calhoun,’ would have slept up in the loft.” (I can’t take credit for this as a literary approach exactly since it is a basic tenet of much social history but it nonetheless reflects the overall theme of so many of the novels we had read—i.e., to make personal the broad swaths of history. Moreover, creating a comfort level for the guides to speak in terms of “assumptions not truths” makes apparent the slippery and often fictive nature of history itself.)
- Emphasize the importance of individuals in their own right: Another student observed that the one brochure that discusses African American life on Fort Hill concludes, “A glimpse into the experience of African Americans at Fort Hill and the study of black history gives a better perspective of the total life experience at the home of John C. Calhoun and Thomas G. Clemson.” She interpreted that as follows: “It sounds like it is saying, ‘The reason that knowledge about the slaves is important is that it lets us know more about Calhoun and Clemson.’ I just don’t agree with that.” What I believe this student was getting at was that every individual at Fort Hill, Calhoun’s wife and his servants and his overseers and his slaves . . . all were important and should stand both contextually and independently as subjects of inquiry. Again, not precisely a literary reflection from the student, but an imaginative connection made between narrative and

its functions. So while my student was distressed by what was essentially a “Great Man” theory of history, she was certainly not responding as a sociologist who was looking for broad social patterns. She was instead making a suggestion that arose out of specificity and narrative.

- Attend to narrative structure: While some students wanted a redesigned tour to be at least representative of what Eichstedt and Small called “segregated knowledge” and present the “Calhoun-Clemson” story while touring the inside of the mansion and the story of the slave community while touring the detached kitchen, other students wanted the tour narrative to be completely integrated. One student drew a parallel to *Beloved* as she discussed her narrative suggestions. She argued that the big plot event in *Beloved* happened before the story began (a child was murdered in order to save it from being returned to slavery) and as the story is revealed during what seems to be the 1870s, it isn’t a huge surprise. Viewers (or readers) of *Beloved* come to realize pretty quickly that the baby was killed and that the spirit of the baby is back in another form. As my student said, this was a metaphor for slavery itself, which is “always with us and not exactly a surprise.” What I believe this student was getting at was that *Beloved* is an extreme example of the persistence and simultaneity of how all history is a living presence in everything. Thus, she explained that the Fort Hill tour should tell a story that wove all sorts of strands together at once, not in separate lectures. The integrated tour would reflect the metaphorical integration of all the living histories and memories of the Fort Hill story.
- Expand the use of documents: While some students simply said they wanted more brochures available about African American history at the site, others in class discussion expanded the point to suggest that other documents be displayed. One student asked if there were plantation account books that would list the distribution of clothing, say. Of course, this is a practical point but it reflects the interplay of documents as a notion of counternarrative. We had discussed Douglass’s writing as a self-conscious creating of a counternarrative and we had also analyzed why Johnson’s novel, *Middle Passage*, had been written as log-book entries. So once students started raising queries about documents at Fort Hill, I was able to prod them into weaving together a notion of how documents might interplay and what kinds of information would fall between the cracks.
- Be cautious about intentionality: It also affected our “reading” of Fort Hill that I had tried to teach texts such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* with a self-conscious problematizing of intentionality. While it is tempting to assume, that is, that Stowe intended certain arguments about slavery to be understood in certain ways, we can’t ever be sure. What we can be at least somewhat more confident about might be how her argument affects us. Thus I would try to keep the students aware of where and how to kick in reader-response theory and what its benefits and shortcomings might be. Being able to divorce a text from its authorial intent in this way became a useful tool in looking at Fort Hill—by throwing intentionality out the window we were able to assume all good will and approach our dealings in a real-world situation with less emotionally heated and judgmental weight.
- Abstract representations: One of the things that virtually all the students referred to in their reflections was that when the slave quarters were finally demolished, many of the remnant stones were used for foundational stones of the first university buildings con-

structed in the 1890s. This image was so troubling that it imprinted itself upon almost every exam essay. Students suggested that plaques commemorating these stones be placed on those buildings. One student even suggested taking similar-looking stones and strategically piling them in small mounds around campus as a quiet sort of commemorative art installation, accompanied with no signage at all—echoing the ways in which the slaves themselves were both omnipresent and ignored. As he noted to justify his proposal, the first line of *Property* runs, “It never ends.”

The final story of this class is still to come. I hope to tactfully and persuasively assemble many of my students’ suggestions and present them to our administration in order to improve community awareness of our history. I doubt the university will be ready to take on many of the more challenging, controversial, or outlandish proposals the students had, such as constructing a massive Colonial Williamsburg–style reconstruction with hundreds of interpreters and freestanding visitors’ centers and exhibit space or, more pointedly, placing markers all over campus reminding visitors that this is where enslaved people once worked, lived, and died. On the other hand, I can see some of the ideas being taken on and the mere fact that they are being made gives me hope for my university and my students. By looking at a variety of texts, and including the university itself as a site for textual interrogation, I hope I broadened not merely my students’ knowledge of representations of slavery, but of representation itself.

NOTES

1. One of the earliest campus buildings, Hardin Hall, was built in 1890 by convict labor but the forced labor I speak of in general terms is the labor of enslaved people before the Civil War.

2. Similarly, we have a Strom Thurmond Center named to honor the South Carolina senator famous for, among other things, devoting his political capital to opposing desegregation. We also have a Tillman Hall, named after Ben Tillman, the staunch white supremacist from the turn of the century. I feel great pride and satisfaction when I look out my office window and see minority students walking by and, in the case of the Strom Thurmond Center, which is partly underground, walking *over* these buildings—demonstrating at least a small triumph of education and justice over racism.

3. To use a quotation from Thomas Clemson’s will that increasingly takes preeminence in the university’s public speeches: this college was to be “a high seminary of learning.” See “The Will of Thomas Green Clemson.”

4. I tried in class, and now in this essay, to weave or alternate terminology such as “enslavement,” “enslavers,” and “enslaved people” with phrases such as “slaves,” “masters,” and “slavery,” which seem to still be core terms of this field. Making apparent the problematic significance of these terms was part of class discussion. Most of all, I encouraged students to refer to people, whenever possible, simply as individuals.

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