

**More Than Just Inclusion: Race, Memory, and Twenty-First Century Cultural Industries**

*Cathy Stanton*

in *American Quarterly* Volume 68, Number 3, 815-822 (September 2016)

***Desire and Disaster in New Orleans: Tourism, Race, and Historical Memory.* By Lynnell L. Thomas. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 272 pages. \$75.39 (cloth). \$24.95 (paper).**

***Upon the Ruins of Liberty: Slavery, the President's House at Independence National Historical Park, and Public Memory.* By Roger C. Aden. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015. 264 pages. \$27.50 (cloth).**

How can we bring into visibility the erased or repressed histories and memories of enslavement and racialized oppression in the United States? And more specifically, how can we do so within the framework of what Bella Dicks has termed “visitability”—the ever more expansive set of mechanisms designed to make places, people, and pasts available for cultural consumption?<sup>1</sup> This is of course a basic question—perhaps *the* basic question—for tourism studies in general: what is the relationship between what is toured and those who are doing the displaying and experiencing, and what happens when these relationships are shaped by existing inequalities and hierarchies? Several recent works have addressed this pair of questions, suggesting that a reexamination of these pasts themselves is being wedded in useful ways to the study and practice of commemoration and representation as reflected in the still quickly growing literature on public memory, public history, and tourism.<sup>2</sup> With Roger Aden’s rhetorically focused account of the controversy over a site of slaveholding in an iconic national park in Philadelphia and Lynnell Thomas’s exploration of how long-standing racialized tropes persist in tourist productions in New Orleans, we have two new city-specific studies that show us the

complexities of analyzing these projects and the cultural, political, and economic conditions in which they are embedded.

Aden's book chronicles the contestation and negotiation that followed the 2002 publication of research documenting the presence of enslaved Africans in George Washington's household during the time when the first president was living in what was then the national capital of Philadelphia. The surviving remnants of the original executive mansion had been demolished in 1951 when the three-acre Independence National Historical Park (established in 1948) was being expanded into today's fifty-five-acre urban plaza, known as Independence Mall. But the revelation of its location and stunningly disjunctive history made it a topic of heated public debate, fueled partly by community memories of African American displacement during the original construction of the mall. The fact that the President's House bombshell dropped during another makeover of the plaza sharpened the debate; a \$12.9 million center dedicated to housing and interpreting the Liberty Bell was about to be built just feet away from where Washington's enslaved Africans had lived and worked. Even more egregiously at odds with the exceptionalist narrative about American freedom, research showed that Washington had knowingly cycled his servants back to his Virginia plantation to avoid the laws that would have freed them after six months' residence in Pennsylvania. The dissonance between the newly exposed past and the shiny new shrine to liberty was too great to survive park administrators' initial attempts to contain it, leading to a vigorous public debate, an archaeological excavation of the site, and an extended design process that produced today's interpretive installation: a re-creation of the outline of the house,

with considerable architectural and interpretive emphasis on the lives and work of the enslaved.

Aden's concern here is with the content of the discursive processes throughout the controversy. He draws on documentary and ethnographic materials—media coverage, internal documents from the National Park Service, plans and designs and the public commentary on them, interviews and observations conducted with key participants and at the completed site itself. He also draws on an analytic tool kit that includes a wide range of theorists writing about collective memory, public history and memorialization, place and place making, rhetoric and discourse. A central component of his theoretical approach comes from Michael Warner's conception of publics as entities that are called into being through the act of being addressed discursively, an idea around which Aden structures his lengthy discussion of particular positions in the various publics he identifies as being involved in the President's House project. One of Aden's stated intentions at the outset is to write in a way accessible and interesting to general as well as scholarly audiences, and while he is not always able to keep his discussion from sliding into conventionally academic diction, the intention is laudable, and many of his summaries of the big ideas in scholarly thinking about history, place, and memory (e.g., that memorials and historic sites are constructed through sometimes-contradictory messages) are clear and potentially useful for those not familiar with the field of memory studies. His nine chapters follow a general chronology from the 2002 revelation to the 2010 opening of the President's House installation. There is an initial description and discussion of the site and the controversy, including an exploration of the multiple meanings encoded in the landscape; a delineation of the initial public outcry and the negotiations, excavation, and

design process that followed; and a two-chapter section on how the actual installation seems to feel, look, and function for those who visit it. His conclusion is that the President's House is at best un compelling in terms of its design and execution—it is literally and visually noisy, with too many competing elements and too little overall coherence—but that even (or perhaps particularly) in its flawed state, it can serve as a place to hold open important questions in the unresolved and overdetermined history of racial inequality and injustice in America.

Lynnell Thomas's book casts a wider net than Aden's single-site focus, covering a good deal of New Orleans's tourist landscape both before and—to a lesser extent—after Hurricane Katrina. After tracing the city's general geography and demography, Thomas examines how its tourism industry has developed, particularly since the mid-1980s decline of its oil economy prompted a much more purposeful turn toward marketing New Orleans as a tourist destination. Noting that this recent shift overlapped with both a post-civil-rights-era consciousness and an expanding population of affluent black middle-class travelers, she explores how marketers worked to redefine the city as a place that celebrated its complex and specifically African American heritage in order for it to appeal to black tourists and (supposedly) benefit lower-income black residents and black-owned businesses. At the same time, as she shows in a chapter on a mainstream tour of the city's central tourist district, the French Quarter, and another on the attempts of some tour guides and tourism promoters to insert counternarratives into guided and packaged tours, how deep-seated racialized categories and figures are both reproduced and flattened by a celebratory multiculturalism that leaves little room for more-nuanced understandings of how class, color, and ancestry have shaped lived experiences in the

city in the past and present. A final chapter on post-Katrina tourism assesses the unevenness of newer narratives that foreground resilience and recovery, showing how they occasionally confront painful pasts through “rememory” but are generally constrained by anxieties about the possible loss of essential tourism revenue in a city where cultural production is a primary economic driver. Unlike Aden, Thomas is pessimistic about the fate of fragile counternarratives in a neoliberal city, concluding in the epilogue that “new racialized narratives about the city’s rebirth underscore the contradictions inherent in a recovery that is based on meeting the desire for black cultural products while it creates disaster (ecological, social, economic, and political) for the communities that originate and disseminate those products” (173).

This territory has been thoroughly explored already by scholars like Kevin Fox Gotham, George Lipsitz, Phaedra Pezzullo, Helen Regis, J. Mark Souther, and others, and Thomas draws on their work throughout. Her contribution to this rather extensive literature on race and cultural representation in New Orleans is the “desire/disaster” analytic. She argues that the twinned tropes of desire and disaster have always underpinned touristic encounters in the city, and that these in turn anticipated the abandonment of black New Orleanians during the first days after Hurricane Katrina and the striking turn toward privatized solutions in the recovery period. In its most straightforward sense, the desire–disaster binary holds up: “desire” refers to the exoticization and sexualization of black bodies and culture and the creation of “spectacles of blackness” that entice and titillate (white) visitors; “disaster” speaks to precisely that abandonment and the way it reflected persistent social, economic, and political inequalities in both pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans (2). As an organizing concept for

the entire book, however, the binary proves so capacious that it ends up being rather vague. In addition to the desire for what is “sensual, exotic, carefree, decadent, or taboo” and the “natural, environmental, political, economic, or racial” (171) disasters that have beset people of color in the city, Thomas also speaks about “the desire for black cultural inclusion and validation” (55) and “a desire for racial justice” as opposed to “the disaster of historical and contemporary racial injustices” (126), a move that relocates the twin terms within black rather than white bodies. Coming at it from yet another angle, she refers to (presumably white supremacist understandings of) “the disaster of black emancipation and desegregation” (7) and “the perceived disaster of black political agitation, resistance, and economic dependence” (55), and in one further twist, she refers to “the looming disaster posed by the overreliance on a vulnerable tourism industry” (159), which hangs over the city as a whole, but most particularly its poorer residents and communities of color. Thomas’s central point is of course that all these types of desire and disaster are interlinked and coconstitutive, but the semantic shifts are unsettling and imprecise, and the interconnections sometimes feel tenuous. A more consistent naming and locating of specific actors and projects in relation to these different yet overlapping experiences of desire and disaster would situate this analytic binary more firmly within the shifting terrains of economic need and opportunity, place attachment and marketing, and the fraught politics of planning and redevelopment, and would help clarify how one person’s desire may well be another’s disaster.

Both authors do strive to convey a sense of how commemorative and tourism-oriented projects emerge from an often-unstable amalgam of local memories and alignments, the imperatives of capital, professionalized discourses of planning and

historical knowledge, and the actions of various publics within and sometimes well beyond a city. But as the slippage around Thomas's use of the desire–disaster binary shows, a detailed parsing of these influences and relationships presents real analytic challenges, which neither book entirely surmounts. Both are at their strongest when describing specific encounters within the commemorative or touristic frame. In Aden's case, this is evident in the chapter on the complex conversations and exchanges that took place on the viewing platform set up for people to watch the President's House excavation in process, and in Thomas's, in the detailed description of neighborhood tours. These chapters beautifully capture the essentially slippery qualities of history making and how both hegemonic and counterhegemonic narratives are continually being constructed through encounters at tourist and memorial sites. In Philadelphia, the slowly unfolding public spectacle of the archaeological dig enabled visitors to share personal and critical responses with strangers in a way that Aden sees as largely realizing the potential for historic sites to serve as vehicles for contemplative civic reflection. He invokes the notion of “absent presences” to explore what was happening on the viewing platform, suggesting that the resonance of the emerging story with the site itself facilitated these encounters. In ways both simple and complex, the physical space of the dig—the gradually appearing evidence of slavery at the heart of an iconic site devoted to liberty, the metaphorical and literal processes of revealing what had been hidden—seems to have created room for reflection and encounter without sliding into either a facile attempt at “healing” or the overly didactic strategies of the eventual exhibit created at the President's House. “Truth buried will at some point rise,” one visitor notes, and it does appear from Aden's account as though at least for a time, collective engagement with that

sense of a gradually rising truth enabled an extraordinary moment of collective reflection (116).

In New Orleans, Thomas crafts an equally compelling analysis of an ostensibly “alternative” tourist offering, Le Monde Créole French Quarter Courtyards tour, that purports to read at least some degree of black presence and agency back into the city’s tourist narrative. By presenting data from her interviews with the tour company owner and guides and from observations of the tours themselves alongside her own more probing interpretation of the historical materials on which the tours are based, she exposes some of the rhetorical and performative strategies buffering that narrative from too-probing questions about race. Thus a biracial son of an elite Creole father and an enslaved mother appears prominently in the tours but without anything ever being said about the choice of his given name—Toussaint—as a likely evocation of the black leader of Haiti’s revolution two generations earlier. Some of the tour guides shared their own counterreadings with Thomas in interviews—one bluntly dismissed the romanticized story of Toussaint’s parentage as a kind of forbidden love affair with the remark “Wasn’t nothing like that”—but Thomas shows how the guides’ own peripheral and economically precarious positions help erode the possibility of these moments leading to the kind of more open acknowledgment of racial injustice and pain that Aden observed on the President’s House viewing platform (92).

The analytic challenge comes in attaching these slippery moments to more fixed positions, identities, or articulations—or rather, showing the range of complexities and contradictions in those supposedly more fixed locations (e.g., how the liberal or community-oriented aims of a tourism promoter or National Park Service interpreter may



in fact serve the expansion of a neoliberal conception of the public realm) and how they relate to both the cultural industries they are part of and the economic and political projects those industries are imbricated into. How is critique so continually foreclosed in these contemporary expressions of memory and history, and how can we understand the kinds of publicness being created (or hampered) in these increasingly widespread settings and processes? Aden tackles this challenge partly by positing a range of publics created through discursive positions clustered around what he admits is a somewhat artificial distinction between people who were most concerned with issues of aesthetics (form, affect, siting) and those who were most driven by political issues (expressed as a concern over the balance being paid to either slavery or the presidency). As an analytic technique, this has the advantage of staying clear of essentialized identities and showing how particular political and ideological positions reflect but sometimes also cut across lines of race, class, and locality. But these discursive publics remain disconnected from the named entities who do appear in Aden's account (community groups, historians, city planners, National Park Service employees) and from his discussion of how visitors to the President's House site seemed to be experiencing the completed installation. Neither book quite finds a way to extend its "on the ground" observations in any empirical way up and across the various networks involved in producing and consuming these sites and displays, leaving gaps in our understanding of how the potential for a truly antiracist understanding of the past in these settings is either created or constrained.

One crucial context that neither book fully connects with is the way that cultural planning, production, and marketing have become a highly professionalized and globalized industry and a set of strategies that urban planners and developers now

ubiquitously pursue. Thomas clearly recognizes this larger context, but despite her critique of the “New Orleans exceptionalism” that prevails in the city’s mainstream tourism discourse, she remains somewhat New Orleans–centric in her own approach to evaluating the tourism industry in her home city. Many of the big factors that she points to as exacerbating racial and economic inequalities there—disproportionate investment in a downtown “tourist bubble” to the detriment of more resource-hungry neighborhoods, aggressive packaging and marketing of whatever can be identified as unique and eye-catching about a place’s past, the proliferation of low-end and insecure service jobs, conversion of former public spaces and sites of production into privately controlled sites of consumption—are of course endemic to tourism- and culture-driven development worldwide. New Orleans has been a bellwether for these trends in the United States: that is one reason it has been so heavily studied. But the particular forms that tourism takes in New Orleans cannot be fully understood through reference to the city alone. Its challenges are both intensely local and characteristically global, and we need to understand and investigate them as such. Aden, too, circumscribes his discussion in ways that cut it off from those larger trends and the rhetorics and politics associated with them. He cites Erika Doss’s recent work on “memorial mania” but does not engage with the important sociological question of what seems to be fueling what Doss identifies as the present obsession with memorialization, nor does he consider how it seems to intersect with the proliferation of media production and consumption within an overall environment of place promotion and competitive culture-based development.

This matters because precisely the things that Thomas and Aden point to as potentially antiracist—the making visible of marginalized histories and difficult pasts—

can themselves be readily drawn into that competition for attention and tourist revenue in heavily “branded” city environments. This is not merely about the commercialization of the past (a process that we now understand as having gone on for a very long time) but about a specific type of cultural production in which even radical and counterhegemonic histories may be always already co-opted, such that their potential for critique is undercut even when they do become present in the tourism or memorial frame. This is by no means at odds with either Aden’s or Thomas’s core arguments, but it does suggest that their questions about discourse and disparity might be located in a somewhat broader framework that examines not just what can be said but also pays attention to the rapidly evolving strategies for creating “visitability” within which inclusion may be just as problematic as exclusion.

## Notes

1. Bella Dicks, *Culture on Display: The Production of Contemporary Visitability* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003).
2. See, e.g., Mark Auslander, *The Accidental Slaveowner: Revisiting a Myth of Race and Finding an American Family* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Andrea Burns, *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013); Antoinette Jackson, *Speaking for the Enslaved: Heritage Interpretation at Antebellum Plantation Sites* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2012); Tiya Miles, *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); and two 2014 practitioner-focused titles from

Rowman and Littlefield, *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*, by Kristin L. Gallas and James DeWolf Perry, and *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*, by Max A. van Balgooy.