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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

The Plantation Spaces in Black and White

Review by Catherine E. LaVoy

Ancestors of Worthy Life: Plantation Slavery and Black Heritage at Mount Clare

by Teresa S. Moyer

University Press of Florida, 2015

With recent national events bringing to the forefront the still present problems of racism in American society, it is critically important to educate the public on the origins of our society's racial divides and the structures that continue to propagate racism. To this end, Teresa Moyer's new book, *Ancestors of Worthy Life: Plantation Slavery and Black Heritage at Mount Clare* (2015), attempts to accomplish this, primarily by providing an alternative to the elite-centered narrative provided by the museum today. Over a decade after Eichstedt and Small (2002) completed their study on the interpretation of slavery on plantation museums across the southern United States, Moyer's book reveals that the practice of symbolic annihilation of slavery is still a problem at plantation museum sites.

Mount Clare is located in the suburbs of Baltimore, Maryland, a city with a large African American population. Like other urban areas of the country, Baltimore City has a problem of structuralized racism, which affects the economic potential of its African American residents. This economic inequality has been recently highlighted in litigation about unethical lending practices, which resulted in the high foreclosure rate in Baltimore for African American residents during the recent economic crisis (ElBoghdady 2008). Moyer's work, while focusing on the history of Mount Clare, carefully draws the reader back to the very modern problem of the creation of racialized spaces. This is far from a modern phenomena; plantation studies have frequently pointed to the creation of racially segregated spaces as a tool of social control (Delle 1998; Singleton 2001). However, what is seen in the modern practice of Mount Clare is not simply a division of space, but a willful erasure of history and an unwillingness to engage with the surrounding predominantly African American community in its

interpretation of the site.

Moyer's focus in this book is to create a counter-narrative, to prove, despite the previous research that has been done on the site and its white elite owners, there exists a story that can be told within the physical structure about slavery. After providing the reader with a general introduction to slavery in Maryland in the eighteenth century, Moyer introduces the founder of the Mount Clare Carroll's family, Dr. Carroll, as a man whose wealth was built on slave labor, in particular through his ownership of the Baltimore Iron Works. Dr. Carroll was not only personally responsible for using enslaved labor at the iron works, but recruited investors who also provided enslaved laborers. These investors, in turn, were required to provide provisions for the ironworks laborers, which enslaved laborers on local plantations cultivated. Moyer successfully paints the picture of a life of wealth that completely hinges on enslaved labor for elite society's production and survival. The book also discusses Dr. Carroll's son, Charles Carroll and his wife, Margaret Tilghman, as Dr. Carroll's successors and founders of Mount Clare. Much of the discussion of Charles and Margaret Carroll's tenure is breaking down the idea of the genteel southern couple by focusing on their enslavement of increasingly large numbers of Africans and African-Americans for their own comfort and economic advancement on the plantation.

Throughout the book, Moyer takes great care to list the names of the enslaved whenever possible, not only humanizing those enslaved, but pointing out the possibility of a counter-narrative rich in the same details that are given in the standard plantation tours, which are always rich in the owners' families personalities. In several instances, she is able to trace the enslaved families past the point of their freedom. This connection to the free African-American community in Baltimore in the past shows potential to engage the African-American community of the present. But Moyer also goes to great pains to reveal the labor in the spaces of the plantation: the cache of ritual artifacts in the kitchen floor, pointing to African-American spiritual practice; the construction of buildings by enslaved laborers; and even the maintenance of the ornamental gardens as the result of African-American labor. In these discussions of spaces, the potential for an application to the current tour seems the greatest. As Moyer subtly shows, the tragedy of the modern plantation tour is the creation of a false dichotomy of white and black spaces that simple did not exist in the past. The enslaved African-American community existed in all spaces on the plantation through their labor and the alienation of that labor only serves to broaden the painful racial divide within America. Modern Baltimore, with its poverty and economic segregation, is a testament to this continued trend.

Moyer teases the reader with what must be an interesting account of the politics of her historical research, explaining how several historical institutions denied her access to their materials for research,

materials to which other researchers had been allowed access. Though she touches on the connections to the modern world and racial politics, her focus on the historic record does not allow her to linger on these subjects as extensively as the reader might like. However, the parallels between the segregation of research and the segregation of race in the modern plantation museum are not lost on the reader.

Race is still a problem in the United States. Though the racial practices have changed, masked by quotidian structures, recent events have helped to expose these structures to national audiences. In light of this, Teresa Moyer's book serves as an important bridge between the work of history, archaeology and modern activism: it gives a structure of how to begin to change the telling of the past.

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