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Sally Hemings and the One Drop Rule of Public History

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Introduction

Good afternoon. My name is Barbara Chase-Riboud. In the course of this conference, I would like to present what one could call interdisciplinary experiences pertaining to the problem of slavery and Public History both in the realm of the visual and the literary.

As the accidental historian amongst you, I have crossed swords with public history as both sculptor and writer of non-fiction novels. When I say public history, I mean the agreed upon consensus of a national identity which is communicated in thought and deed to the current and next generation as truth. Public history is the accumulation of all the mythologies, definitions, common places, taboos and illusions that make up the nation's psyche.

As a writer, I backed back into issues of slavery and the public by default. I discovered the Thomas Jefferson-Sally Hemings liaison twenty-five years ago and wrote *Sally Hemings a Novel*, a book which amongst other things challenged public history and raised the ire of all the Jeffersonians. As a sculptor, this accident led to a whole new career of illuminating, untold, unknown, invisible subjects left behind by

public history and finally of course to the D.N.A. denouncement and verification of the Jefferson Liaison in 2000.

It is perhaps a mite ingenuous to even pose the topic of this conference to which we already know the answer: Why is the subject of slavery avoided in the written and oral presentation of the history of the United States? Why is it still taboo, still so painful, still so present? One might even say omnipresent since there was a racial basis for slavery in the America's and the legacy of the black presence which serves as the basis of racism in America remains. Slavery is at the very core of American history almost to its defining moment. The "spook" so to speak, "That sat by the door" who by its presence evokes all the contradictions of our national narrative- A national narrative perfectly devoid of any reference to the black presence slavery represents. It can be said that there are no errors in history, only consequences. The consequences in this case is the obligatory elimination of any trace of our national secret: the birth of white freedom in the bosom of a slave society with all that that implies self-allusion, lies, misinformation, guilt, mental acrobatics and total amnesia in order to render this knowledge compatible with our American dream, national image and the idea of the inestimable value of liberty both public and individual.

Because slavery and the persons who are subjugated to it were necessary to the creation and the survival of a viable United States as a nation and an economic entity – in other words a *raison d'etat*, - it was held permissible, even defensible to retain and protect it. In order to do this, a theory of invisibility based upon inferiority had to be invented. This was done in two ways: one psychological brainwashing and secondly the invention of racism- the exact opposite of the Patriot's creed of equality, liberty and independence on which the national identity was based, thus creating a

permanent split personality that moreover had to be kept secret. To mention slavery at all was to insure discomfort, guilt, confusion in the minds of both the victims and the perpetrators. The institution was untouchable. Founding history had to be virgin – without slavery and without the black presence, which in turn, created a rhetoric all its own. And the best guarantee of this rhetoric was silence. A cloak of silence was invented around this untouchable institution allowing the United States to begin its life an innocent, void of slavery and the contaminating black presence which was at the time one-fifth of the colonial population. In other words, this black fifth negated the virginity and purity of our origins and national myth (the amazing sexual overtones of this are of course present everywhere in racist cant). The idea of a country born of love and desire for freedom, tolerance, innocence, equality and immigration (Give me your poor, tired, weak etc.) was superimposed on this same new country that still retained chattel hereditary slavery.

Exposition

Americans have fought three wars over slavery: The Revolutionary War, the Civil War and the Civil Rights War, each successive war containing the seeds of the proceeding one. Of the three wars fought over slavery, the American Revolution or War of Independence is surely the most contradictory and tragic. In 1776, in a country of 10.5 million colonists, one-fifth or two million and a half were black, slave or free, North or South, a fact hardly mentioned in the annals of Revolutionary history. Moreover, all of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence were slave holders except John Adams and Benjamin Franklin. Who were these blacks in America before the revolution and what were they doing, saying, thinking during the six years war? Moreover, what were the Patriots doing or saying about them? And if they were invisible, insignificant and negligible historically, why

were the Patriots going to war with George V over the fact that he intended to abolish slavery in his American colonies as he had in England?

The War of Independence was fought to preserve the institution of slavery in America both North and South because victory without slavery was not believed to be viable. The lasting result of the Patriot's victory was that those blacks who had been freed by reaching the British lines and serving the crown were exiled or re-enslaved while the rest continued to fester in servitude for another 84 years.

Eighty-four years later, the Civil War was fought over the self same black presence, this time to preserve the union. What were the 3 million blacks doing or thinking as 500,000 Americans including 30,000 blacks fought and died over an untenable principle led by a reluctant President who wanted only one thing: to save the union with or without slavery. As far as public history is concerned, this was a white brother's incestuous war over States heights and the capitalist freedom to hold slaves as property. The black presence itself was only an afterthought until Lincoln needed black union soldiers to win the war. Yet, if this 20 percent of the population was so much an afterthought, why did the constitutional congress count them as three-fifths of a white American?

One hundred years later, the Civil Rights War and the black pressure once again troubled the innocence of America. Non-pulsed, America tried to come to terms with black anger and desperation over the residence of slavery within the void of two world wars to free Europe from slavery and totalitarianism. This American innocence I call one drop of public history

This is the rule which defines the race in the US: one black grandfather made one black but one white grandfather didn't make one white. In other words, one drop of black DNA not only excludes one from joining the human race to the fifth

generation but contaminated an entire existence, a whole personality and entity, making it invisible.

It is only a small step to contend that if one drop of black DNA makes a black American, than one drop of black HISTORY makes a multi-racial America, adulterating her memory, her identity as a white man's country. Somehow, we would have to wipe out the entire memory of the institution of slavery and the black presence by forgetting, erasing, nullifying or re-writing history. That is why the DNA verification of the Jefferson-Hemings affair was so shocking. That is why the reaction to the vulgarization of the 38-year liaison between Thomas Jefferson, the inventor of our national identity and his slave sister-in-law Sally Hemings was so outraged and belligerent (one critic claimed Jefferson was being accused of pedophilia). The one drop of black blood Sally Hemings represented was enough to taint America's memory, her identity (i.e. Jefferson). No episode of history that rectified this Sally Hemings rule was to be tolerated.

After Sally Hemings I wrote the Amistad revolt novel *Echo of Lions*, around an episode considered up until then, a diplomatic incident between Spain and the United States. I built a story which posed the issues of slavery as war and the right of self defense in the face of kidnapping and captivity which became the first civil rights case to be argued before the Supreme Court. Most lawyers I spoke to had never heard of John Quincy Adams magnificent self-published plea before the Supreme Court, or the victory he won for his client Joseph Cinque and others, the sequestered Africans of the Amistad ship. Again fiction was used to illuminate and compensate for historical amnesia.

It was in researching my fourth novel, *The President's Daughter*, a fictional recreation of Jefferson's and Hemings' daughter Harriet as the "tragic mulatto"

passing as a white woman during the civil war that I ran across something called “*The Negro’s Civil War*”. Wait a minute, I thought. The Negro had a Civil War separate and apart from the white one? You bet. Negroes could not be eliminated after all so they had to be segregated according to the Sally Hemings rule in a contortionist act Houdini would have had trouble escaping from.

The character of Harriet was clearly fiction. But the premise of Harriet’s experiences and the law of one drop are historical. What Harriet risked if she was discovered was annihilation, political and social and possibly physical. She risked what Jefferson had risked for her mother: being charged with a felony, fine imprisonment and for Hemings, re-enslavement. This was basically, a book about miscegenation disappearance and identity both hidden and double. A woman whose double life left her no identity and whose sons fight in the Civil War to free her without knowing her real identity or theirs. This double life/double or triple identities. This hidden invisible incestuous has been the on-going theme in my historical novels from the very beginning.

In the beginning, the novels posed a clear separation between my day job of creating visual art. I like to point out that there was poetry and statuary before there was written history. The visualization of history as narrative sculpture is the second reason for my crossing swords with public history. Call it monuments and memory

Monuments like music are universally essential to the human spirit and to memory. Statuary is memory and memory is exactly what the issue of slavery lacks. I will have to backtrack to ten years before the publication of the novel *Sally Hemings*, to my first encounter with the principle that the black presence be invisible as far as Art History is concerned as well.

In the 70's I created four sculptures dedicated to the memory of the assassinated Malcolm X. They created a firestorm of controversy and outrage especially from critics who contended that the memorialization and glorification of an invisible historical personage with sculptures that were powerful, abstract and convincing was an insult to both "Art" and patriotism. The contention was that nothing in Malcolm's history merited beauty and only narrative brutality was suitable to Malcolm's image. In other words, the black presence even in American art could not exist nor could it by definition be beautiful or have anything to do with the visualization and classicism I evoked. Which brings me to the creation of a memorial to commemorate the 30,000 African Americans buried in New York City's African Burial Ground that stretches under Wall Street, through the financial district and runs to the Federal Building by lower Broadway that houses the CIA? Here again the pre-Revolutionary presence of blacks in America (20 percent of the population in New York was black) made itself to an accidental historian. The monument I made referred not only to the African Burial Ground but to the very convention of scientific racism itself in using the *Hottentot Venus* as a *Nike*. A cemetery for black colonials was discovered under Wall Street and lower Broadway in New York City when the foundations for a new Federal building were being excavated in 1994. That there were 20,000 black colonials buried under Wall Street was enough of a shock, but to realize that 20 percent of the population of New York in 1776 was black was a revelation to someone whose vision of Colonial America had always been as white only – when the entire population of the US was 20.5 million people, 4 million of them were Black. Public history had managed to eliminate all of them from official annals including those who fought in exchange for their freedom for the British crown as black loyalists during the War for Independence.

This monument stands as I speak at 290 Broadway at the lobby of the Federal Building that houses the CIA and sometimes it appears in the background in television shots of the CIA entrance with its gold disk embedded into the floor of the marble foyer.

This memorial called *African Rising*, which consists of a cast bronze 18-foot winged *Nike* inspired by the mother of scientific racism, Sarah Baartman, the South African herdsman also known as the *Hottentot Venus*. This was before I had any idea that I would write her story in novel form 6 years later as the *Hottentot Venus*.

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visualization and classicism I evoked. The critics were adamant, only primitivism and folk art could be inspired by the black presence.

Which brings me to the creation of my memorial to commemorate the 30,000 African Americans buried in New York City's African Burial Ground which stretches under Wall Street, through the financial district and runs to the Federal Building on lower Broadway that houses the CIA? Here again the knowledge of the pre-Revolutionary presence of blacks in America (20 percent of the population in New York was black) made me to an accidental historian. The monument I created referred not only to the African Burial Ground as Memory, but to the very convention of the one drop rule of invisibility. That there were 20,000 black colonials buried under Wall Street was enough of a shock, but to realize that 20 percent of the population of New York City in 1776 was black was a revelation to someone who had been taught a white only vision of Colonial America— when the entire population of the US at the time was 20.5 million people, and 4 million of them were Black. Public history had managed to eliminate all of them from official annals including those who fought in exchange for their freedom for the British crown as black loyalists during the War for Independence.

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I call the mother of scientific racism, was exhibited in Europe as a freak upon whose body George Cuvier, the French naturalist invented racism. I glorified that same body by giving it wings and turning it into a classic *Nike*. (May I please have the next slide).

If you are the general public you have no way of fixing such a figure in your consciousness or even your imaginations. This is where the visual, the monument, the banner, the emblem, the flag comes into Public History. Monuments are nations' exclamations, marks, their anchors, their seawalls, and their time-markers. They have existed since the beginning of history from Stone Hedge to the Berlin Holocaust memorial as part of public history. There is no international monument anywhere in the world dedicated to the memory of these deportees – not as memory, not as memorial, not as an apology for their inestimable suffering. Their memory must be rehabilitated and honored and this experience integrated into the warp and weave of American and European history in order for us to come to terms with this past public crime: not in the spirit of re-vindication or as a demand for reparation, but as an ultimate gesture of reconciliation between one drop and public history and their common past and denominator which brings me to a work in progress, *The Middle Passage* monument. (Please show slide.)

Many years ago during the Clinton administration I had proposed for Washington, D.C. a memorial to the 11 million victims of the Middle Passage as the Atlantic slave trade was called not as a gesture of accusation and re-vindication but as a means of reflection, memory and the true meaning of the Black presence as part of the American identity.

The design is the result of more than twelve years of reflection. I proposed a bronze-cast double obelisk of some 30-feet between which is suspended a bridge around which a chain representing a link for every victim, the chain symbolically

leading back to African soil. Reproductions of these links would be struck in bronze or silver and sold to living persons... These links would symbolize their presence as invisible founding fathers.

Each link representing a nameless victim would be claimed by a living person – an individual, a wife, a husband, a church, a city – so that the unknown victim becomes in a sense a real entity with a past, a present, a future, a family with descendants who bare witness to that victim's martyrdom. The 11 million sponsors would create a permanent endowment and would form an international community in itself.

The Middle Passage monument would be the first international memorial in the world commemorating the end of the slave trade (1808) and a symbolic meeting place. The key concept here is memory and collective memory, what we have failed to do up until now.

Today, I propose it as an international symbol to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the end of the Atlantic slave trade which involves many countries; almost all of Europe; Norway, Holland, Spain, Portugal, France, Belgium as well as Great Britain and the United States. It was in fact the first globalized industry.

I have reworked this proposal as an international one headed by UNESCO to memorialize the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade.

Conclusion

The reasons we have failed to honor memory have less to do with collective guilt or fear of black retaliation than the structure of racism produced to justify slavery: the one contaminating drop.

The shocked resistance of the defenders of Public History to any mention of this great contradiction if not to say hypocrisy and crime, is caused not only by its subversiveness but by the ferocious amnesia of our history.

Until school children, black and white sitting side by side are taught the American Revolution's "dirty little secret" proposed by Gary Nash that focuses the overdue rethinking of the American Revolution as involving at its core a third party totally unrecognized which are African Americans we will never arrive at a real public discussion of slavery and what it means to us as Americans. The stereotype of Black Americans as passive credulous non-entities lurking invisible in the shadows of a brilliant, successful, freedom loving revolution must be refuted. It must be remembered that at the end of the Revolution there were more enslaved Americans than at the beginning. The Patriots fought George V to preserve slavery in the United States. North and South Carolina refused to join the revolution until slavery was guaranteed untouched. The British government represented by Lord Dunmore offered freedom to slaves who would join the British to put down the American rebellion, and many blacks took the Revolution's stirring words about slavery and tyranny and applied them to themselves. I can no longer hear slave-owning Patrick Henry's words to the Continental Congress anymore with out a start.

"Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me... (He holds an ivory letter opener above his breast) Give me Liberty or give me death."

Who with the same breath, in the same timeframe, declared:

Would anyone believe that I am master of slaves of my own purchase? I am drawn along by the general inconvenience of living without them... I know not where to stop, I could say many things on this subject, a serious review of which give a gloomy perspective to future times...

"Future times" included the Civil War of 1860 and the Civil Rights War a hundred years later. But until Public History points out that the Civil Rights Movement is directly connected to the Civil War and that that war was the direct result of the

Revolutionary War. We will never have a true understanding of any of these wars or why they were fought. Why explain when it is so upsetting to the majority? Because the division of Public History into the visible and the invisible, acceptable and non-acceptable, touchable and non-touchable, black and white has led us to a place where we don't understand anything, neither ourselves, our common history nor our own psyche.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons Americans unlike many other cultures are indifferent to their history if not to say, they detest their history. They don't like memory; neither do they respect it, good or bad. They want to hear only about the here and now, the present as truth and therefore, innocence. Perhaps because of this we fail to learn from the errors committed in the past and go on repeating them or ignoring them.

One might ask if anything is sacred. I believe on the contrary, everything is sacred. Each bone and twig and parcel of history contributes to the whole and the whole public consciousness and cannot be removed without removing part of truth and producing irreconcilable enigmas. For example, the history of the American Revolution is written as if for six long years or more 20 percent of the populations of the colonies had simply disappeared from the face of the earth. White patriots fought the revolution to liberate themselves and retain the right to, amongst other things, preserve and propagate slavery. This is perhaps the last great taboo of public history. Blacks in revolutionary times had a terrible choice to make between the slave holding colonists and his slave society and the possibility of freedom from the enemy of his country, the British.

It is this perception of race and blackness – that is at the hidden core of early American literature and early American history. It is as if we were desperately trying

to tear out this heart of darkness which is an integral part of the American identity – a part that cannot be excised but must be absorbed reconciled integrated and above all recognized –

That is why we don't want to talk about slavery. That is why we can't talk about slavery. That is why we can't even talk about *not* talking about slavery.

Finally, as you can see my path in prose, poetry and statuary has crossed that of public history many times, sometimes sought and sometimes the person who is most surprised at the controversy is myself, caught unaware as a sculptor poet in the guise of an accidental historian of how deep and how persistent the contradictions and enigmas concerning the black presence at the core of the American nation is and how astutely and persistently the war to remove blacks from its participation is fought. Not only the history of the revolution but the roots of civil rights which grew out of the pre-revolutionary determination of African Americans to apply the precepts of freedom and liberty and equality to themselves in an attempt to hold the majority to its own definition of the rights of mankind.

The contradiction this attitude poses is almost overwhelming in its ability to negate the founding Public History of a nation which is supposed to be the innovator and exporter of the idea of the inestimable value of Liberty.

Thank you very much.

Barbara Chase-Riboud
Paris, 26 September 2006

Notes

1. *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*
2. 2.5 million population in 1776 – Nash Gary, *The Forgotten Fifth*
3. 20 percent of the population is black
4. Signers of the Declaration - all slave holders
5. Blacks in Civil War - combined number of troops north and south, number of dead
6. Continental Congress 4/5th clause for counting population for representation in Congressional House
7. one drop rule of racial categories
8. publication *Sally Hemings*, Viking, 1979
9. *The Jefferson scandals*, Dabney, Virginus
10. Monticello White Paper on Hemings 2002
11. *The President's Daughter*, Chase-Riboud Barbara, Crown, 1994 New York
12. The Negro's Civil War
13. The New York Times
14. African Burial Ground, Harris Leslie M., In the Shadow of Slavery African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863
15. population of US 1776
16. Address Africa Rising monument
17. Echo of Lions, William Morrow 1986
18. Chase-Riboud vs. Dreamworks
19. Burgess vs. Chase-Riboud
20. www.cornelllawschool
21. African deportees during triangular trade
22. Middle Passage monument, BCR sculptor, Page number Anthony Janson, Peter Selz
23. Patrick Henry
24. Patrick Henry
25. BCR New York Harold Tribune,
26. Afterwards, Sally Hemings, 1994 Edition, Bantam Books

Projection Disk with illustrations

1. Malcolm X # 3
2. Malcolm X # 2
3. Malcolm X # 7
4. Africa Rising
5. Africa Rising
6. Middle Passage Monument