

Abstract from the Eighth Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference
at Yale University

Slavery and Public History: An International Symposium

November 2-4, 2006
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

The British Slave Trade: Forms of Memory and Memorializing

Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, Boston College

Available online at www.yale.edu/glc/publichistory/wallace.pdf

In my 2006 publication, *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory* I surveyed a range of cultural spaces and forms—museum exhibits, commemorative sites, novels, films, and plays--in England to see how they remembered the eighteenth-century transatlantic slave trade. Though my field is eighteenth-century studies, I chose I chose to examine examples from one, late-twentieth century decade—1990 to 2000—a time when the effort to bring the slave trade into public view seemed especially urgent and intense.

When I began my project, I was struck by a vocabulary that frequently spoke of “telling the untold” or of uncovering secrets and lies, or of revealing the repressed facts of slave trade for public memory. However, I would argue that such vocabulary--with all the psychoanalytic baggage that accompanied it—ultimately proved unfruitful: it wasn’t the case that the trade was an “untold story” in public memory. (In fact, historians had been telling the story for some time,

even if that story hadn't made its way into public discourse.) Instead, when I returned to the eighteenth-century circumstances of the trade and to the situation of those who lived and profited under its vast financial network, I was disturbed to recognize how often the "evils" of the trade were simply not perceived or recognized as such. Instead, those evils were very often experienced as a fact of everyday life—the source of terrific gain for many who simply chose not to place slavery within a moral context.

And so, revisiting the transatlantic slave trade, I found there is a difference between *uncovering* a memory of human atrocity and genocide and *creating* a memory of the circumstances—moral, economic, social, and otherwise--that allowed such a wide-scale human tragedy to persist for so long. It is the second project that ultimately has preoccupied me. By moving towards the concept of *created* memories, I found myself asking a different set of questions, such as, how was it possible to live with the facts of the slave trade and to be unmoved by the human suffering it entailed? What kept those who came before us from recognizing their full complicity and their guilty implication in the African slave trade?

There were additional consequences to this shift in focus. Once I moved away from the idea that we need to "excavate" memories which were never buried, I found that certain binary oppositions—between a guilty past and a not-guilty now, for instance, or between the "bad guys" and the "good guys" of history no longer held true. When we move towards *creating* memories, I think we are forced to realize how much more complicated are the questions of complicity and

guilt. Approaching my subject from this angle, I found myself asking “where will my ancestors one day find me to have been morally remiss? Where will they one day find me guilty of not seeing a painfully obvious moral truth?” Thus *creating memories* requires that we ask ourselves about our own contemporary blind spots, the events or circumstances for which we will one day be held accountable.

Creating memories also requires that we recognize human agency on many levels and that we engage everyone in the process of recovery and that we encourage what I want to call *creative memories*—active and dynamic cultural forms that engage participants in a process of moral reckoning and comprehension. For the rest of my presentation, I will very briefly discuss examples of what worked best in British attempts to remember the transatlantic slave trade, what didn't work, and why. I will mention in particular active, participatory cultural forms that directly engaged individuals in the process of memory and that allowed them to become makers of narrative.