MEMORIALISATION AND REPRESSING THE MEMORY OF SLAVERY IN BERMUDA
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Abstract: This paper is the result of three months research in Bermuda on the history, the memorialisation, and the lack of memorialisation of Bermudian slavery. There is a paucity of research in this area, and this study seeks to address this lacuna by contributing to this neglected field.

Focusing on the memorialisation of slavery in Bermuda, it begins with a brief history which also considers aspects relating to historical amnesia and the repression of the memory of Bermudian slavery. An account follows of Bermuda’s African Diaspora Heritage Trail, a UNESCO officially designated slave route project, to establish whether there exists an adequate amount of memorialisation on the island. The paper also provides a critique on both the negative and positive aspects of the trail, and explores what the trail actually means to the history of slavery in Bermuda, and around the world. It further considers why there is a universal need for a trail which allows citizens to actively participate or perform, as Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace describes it.

Specific sites included in the trail are identified, and the reasons why certain sites are left out examined. The paper also touches on the trail’s funding and the missing plaques on the houses where Mary Prince (co-author of the first female slave narrative published in Britain) was once enslaved.

Keywords: Bermuda, Slavery, Caribbean/Transatlantic, Commemoration, Politics of Memory, Heritage, Memorialisation.

The Bermuda islands, previously recognised as the Isle of Devils, were first settled by the Virginia Company in 1609, as a result of the shipwreck of the Sea Venture, a vessel heading for Virginia from England. It is widely believed that ‘accounts of the “wracke and redemption” of the Sea Venture’s company inspired William Shakespeare to pen The Tempest’ (Jarvis 2002, 588). After successfully building two ships, the company left and returned in 1612 to permanently settle the islands and subsequently colonise them. However, many historians believe that prior to this, in the sixteenth century, the existence and whereabouts of the islands were known to the Spaniards. Accordingly, the islands were named after Juan Bermúdez, the Spaniard who discovered them. Bermuda’s participation in the atrocities of the transatlantic slave trade can be traced back to around the period of its settlement. It ended in 1834, along with other British colonies. Following emancipation on August 1st, Bermuda was one of the only British colonies to give the blacks complete freedom,
without the restrictions that clauses relating to apprenticeship came with. Nevertheless, many laws were enacted, which were aimed at blacks and attempted to restrict their rights, which came about as a result of white inhabitants desiring the extradition of free Bermudian blacks. Despite this, many of the said blacks led very successful lives in and out of Bermuda, as will be further discussed.

Although blacks were not imported onto the islands until after 1612, it is believed that in 1603, as a result of the intense weather Bermuda is renowned for, a ship was forced into Bermuda waters. As a result of this, Bermuda saw its first black man, a crewman who went by the name of Venturilla. Additionally, records show that two of the passengers on the Sea Venture were of Indian descent. ‘Thus, even before the first permanent settlers arrived in 1612, representatives of two races that would later play important roles in the history of Bermuda had already been on the island’ (Packwood 2012, 20). In 1616, Bermuda began contributing towards the African diaspora through its first importation of blacks. It became the first English colony to do so. The governor at the time, Daniel Tucker, sent a ship to the Savage Islands with the purpose of collecting ‘negroes’ who were able to dive for pearls and help with the growth of tobacco, a commodity which contributed greatly to Bermuda’s economy until around the late seventeenth century. The ship brought back a black man and an Indian man, who subsequently contributed the eventual formation of an interracial society. Throughout Bermuda’s era of involvement in the slave trade, many of its slaves were imported from the West Indies, and barely ever directly from Africa.

Before becoming slaves, the first blacks in Bermuda held the title of ‘indentured servants’, who earned wages and worked amongst white and Indian servants. However, according to historical documentation, we can see that these ‘servants’ were eventually required to be of service to their masters for 99 years or more, rather than 4 or 5 years, which was essentially slavery. Thus, we can see that ‘this subtle but devastating change brought the black man to the lowest state of servitude-chattel slavery’ (Packwood 2012, 27). This shift came about as a result of Bermudian whites preferring the extortionate, cheap labour which was born out of the transatlantic slave trade. Also, during this period of indentured servitude, penal slavery was not uncommon amongst all races, including whites. In 1617, ‘Symon the Negro’ was charged with ‘having to do with a child in carnal copular’ (Hallett 2005, 10). As a consequence of this, he was ‘by the court condemned to be a slave to the Colony during the Governor’s pleasure’ (ibid.). Thus, Symon became Bermuda’s first official black slave. Additionally, his name was the first name of any black to be mentioned in Bermuda’s colonial records.
Interestingly, Bermuda became the first country to legally discriminate against blacks, and this works as a challenge to the view that slavery in Bermuda was mitigated. This happened in 1623 when ‘an Act to restrain the insolencies of the Negroes’, was passed. This Act ‘forbade blacks to buy or sell, barter or exchange tobacco or any other produce for goods, without the knowledge and consent of their master’ (Packwood 2012, 25). This was the beginning of a long string of laws aimed at controlling and restricting all blacks in Bermuda.

Slave labour in Bermuda was slightly different to other Caribbean islands where a majority of the slaves spent their days working on one of the many plantations that the Caribbean islands were renowned for. In Bermuda, most slave occupations were linked to the sea, such as ship-building, navigating, and piloting, which was an occupation that Bermudian blacks excelled in, as will be discussed in more detail later. According to Cyril Packwood, ‘Bermuda’s diversified economy meant that a slave had to have more skill and versatility than a plantation slave in America and the West Indies where only a single crop had to be cultivated’ (2012, 28). The occupations of female slaves included various different types of domestic work, and other more usual jobs, such as that of a field-hand. Surprisingly, in 1652, a female slave called Black Moll undertook the role of an executioner as a form of punishment. The jobs assigned to male slaves included a whole range of things, such as domestic work, fieldwork, whale-hunting, building, and salt gathering at the Turks and Caicos Islands. Similar to the rest of the world, slaves became symbols of their owner’s wealth. According to Virginia Bernhard, in Bermuda ‘an individual’s wealth was often measured in the number of slaves rather than acres’ (Bernhard 1985, 248). This was partially due to the fact that ‘land had always been scarce in Bermuda; slaves on the other hand, had become plentiful’ (ibid.).

Bermudian slaves also endured the lack of freedom and consistently torturous conditions and punishments that other slaves around the world had to bear. Despite this, there are many records of historians describing that slaves in Bermuda were treated well and were better off than other slaves, and it was believed that ‘some of the records suggest a leniency toward servants in Bermuda that stands in striking contrast to the treatment of the labour force in Virginia and in the Caribbean islands’ (Bernhard 1985, 62). There are also records of Bermudian officials, during the era of slavery, boasting about treating their slaves well, which was primarily done to defend their disregard of human rights. However, this raises numerous questions. This is because no matter how well slaves were treated, it is important to note that they were still enslaved, treated sub-humanly, and had their freedom, family and identity stolen from them. Historian Virginia Bernhard writes about how Bermudian slave masters ‘exhibited remarkable concern for the welfare of servants’, and goes on to
state that ‘in 1624 Governor Henry Woodhouse instructed the colony’s overseers to watch out for “the hard usage of any masters towards their servants” and to make sure that servants had adequate “victual, apparel, lodging and necessaries convenient for them”’ (Bernhard 1985, 31). Susette Lloyd, in *Sketches of Bermuda* (1835), discusses Bermuda’s lack of apprenticeship system and states that Bermuda ‘was enabled to take so decisive a step with confidence and safety, partly because the mitigated form of slavery which prevailed here, could not generate such reciprocal feelings of acrimony or distrust as may have been awakened in the sugar colonies’ (viii). Although Lloyd goes on to recognise that slavery in Bermuda was still atrocious, the description of the Island’s slavery as ‘mitigated,’ and claims that it’s era of slavery could not create feelings of ‘acrimony or distrust’ amongst the blacks, cannot be true when such a big population was held and enslaved against their will. While working on a Bermudian sloop, former slave and abolitionist, Olaudah Equiano, wrote of the cruelty of white Bermudians which makes us question the above claims. He wrote of a situation where:

> all knew this young man from a child that he was always free, and no one had ever claimed him as their property: however ... it happened that a Bermudas captain ... came on board of us, and seeing the mulatto-man, whose name was Joseph Clipson, he told him he was not free, and that he had orders from his master to bring him to Bermudas ... his men laying violent hands on him: and although he shewed a certificate of his being born free in St. Kitt's, and most people on board knew that he served his time to boat building, and always passed for a free man, yet he was taken forcibly out of our vessel (Equiano 1789, VI).

This is a prime example of the Bermudian slave system stripping blacks of their rights. The fact that Joseph Clipson had documentary evidence, supporting his claims of freedom, did not matter. To the all-white Bermudian oppressors, this man was simply black, and this meant that they could breach his human rights no matter the case. Ultimately, one can describe this event as a kidnapping. It also makes us question the validity of the claims that Bermudian slaves were cared for and treated better. This is because while St. Kitt’s (one of the major sugar colonies, renowned for its inhumane treatment of blacks) was able to grant Clipson his freedom, Bermuda appears to be more criminal by taking it away from him.

The main attempt to uphold the memory of slavery in Bermuda is through the establishment of the African Diaspora Heritage Trail (ADHT), which also hosts an annual conference. As the need for some
sort of adequate memorialisation on the Island became overwhelmingly necessary, the trail was created in 2001, and so Bermuda hosted the first ADHT conference. Thus, according to Kitty Pope, ‘Bermuda articulates the importance of the development and conservation of black culture and heritage sites and programs’ (Pope, n.d.).

On the official ADHT website, the trail was described as an:

International cultural tourism initiative that promotes socially conscious travel to sites identified as relevant and important to the global narrative of people and culture of African descent. It is designed to educate visitors and safeguard the core values and creativity of African cultures and history … ADHT destinations will … motivate local populations to become active participants in the preservation and dissemination of their history and culture (ADHT 2013).

The ‘active participation’ of citizens and tourists ‘in the preservation and dissemination of their history and culture’ plays a crucial role in the conservation of memory and the safeguarding of African history, and as slave trails invite people to physically ‘perform,’ they prove quite useful in this sense. In relation to this, Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace stated that:

Indeed through their dialogue with the ghosts of the past, walkers can also be seen as performers … As walkers traverse modern city streets, they participate in the making of another historical reality … then walkers move toward an alternative political reality, one in which they both recognise the need for redress and become aware of the need for social action (2006, 55).

Alan Rice linked this with the notion of guerrilla memorialisation and suggested that:

The use by Kowaleski-Wallace of performance theory to explicate the way Slave Trails have the potential to educate and politicise their audience is an exemplary intervention that shows that the performing of guerrilla memorialisation is made possible by a civic engagement that might involve merely the walking of a city with new information that provides radical new perspectives that transform the cityscape (Rice 2012c, 253).
Accordingly, it is the actual use and performance of following the Bermuda ADHT which results in guerrilla memorialisation, rather than the actual construction of it by state officials. However, unfortunately, the existence of the ADHT is not widely known around the world. In fact, even more disappointingly, many citizens in Bermuda itself are unaware of the trail’s existence, and out of those who are aware, not many have actually followed it. This could be down to the fact that some people believe that there is an inadequate amount of memorialisation provided to the citizens on the Island. In this case, it seems as though there has to be guerrilla memorisation by Bermudian citizens, to make up for the lack of ‘ordinary’ and ‘official’ memorialisation. However, the ADHT does demonstrate that there are quite a lot of different memorials on the Island. It is quite surprising that on such a small island like Bermuda, there are many memorials, while, in comparison, large continents like America (where there is arguably much more to be remorseful about), there seems to be a great absence of memorialisation. According to Alan Rice, ‘there is not yet a federal museum or memorial to the slave trade in the US, a shameful omission in a nation where many famous political buildings, including the White House, were erected by slave labour’ (Rice 2012a, 8). Thus, memorials, as well as working as a way of commemorating the past, serve as a physical commentary on the politics of a specific area or society.

The ADHT is an extremely important aspect of Bermudian history. The trail includes a number of different sites, all of which have a bronze plaque on them, designed by the renowned Bermudian sculptor Carlos Dowling, which highlight that they are part of the ‘Officially Designated UNESCO Slave Route Project’. The sites included in the trail are:

1. The Commissioners House at the Bermuda Maritime Museum, which includes an exhibition on Bermudian slavery.

(Author’s Photograph)
2. Cobbs Hill Methodist Church, which is the oldest Methodist building in Bermuda and was built by free blacks and slaves at night and on weekends for worship.

(Author’s photographs)

3. A sculpture at Barrs Bay Park labelled ‘we arrive’, which was created by Chesley Trott and dedicated in 2010 to commemorate the 175th anniversary of the slave-holding ship *The Enterprise*, which was forced to anchor at the site due to bad weather conditions in 1835 (a year after abolition in Bermuda), and the 78 slaves on board were given the option of freedom by the Bermudian Government (all of whom took the opportunity, except one woman and her five children).

(Author’s photograph)
4. Verdmont Historic House Museum, which was built and maintained by slaves.

5. Jeffrey’s cave at Spittal Pond, which served as a hide-away for a runaway slave.

6. Gibbet Island, which was also known as the ‘gallows island’ for its role in exemplary punishments.

7. The Lost at Sea Memorial, which was erected in memory of the slaves and free blacks who lost their lives at sea, while employed as whalers, fisherman or even pilots.

8. St Georges Historical Society Museum, which was owned by a black couple who owned their own slaves.
9. St. Peter’s church, where blacks (enslaved or free) were buried in a separate graveyard to that of the white population.

(Author’s photographs)

10. The Bermudian Heritage Museum, which is the only museum on the Island solely dedicated to black history.

11. Tucker’s House Museum, where a remarkable slave used the kitchen as a barber shop to earn money and, following his freedom, he became one of the first ever blacks to be elected in the United Sates House of Representatives.

(Author’s Photographs)
12. Pilot Darrell’s Square, where the house of Jemmy Darrell, one of the most respected black pilots is located. He was actually the first documented black Bermudian to be freed from slavery as British admiral George Murray was so impressed with his navigational skills that he requested his freedom, and this was eventually granted on the death of his master.

![Author’s Photograph](image)

13. The Sally Bassett sculpture, which was sculpted by Carlos Dowling, and depicts the horrifying burning of a slave who was supposedly involved in the ‘Poisoning Plots.’

![Author’s photographs](image)

Each and every one of these memorials is greatly significant of a dark time in Bermuda’s history. However, to come to terms with this dark time and to begin to understand it, the presence of these monuments is vital. According to Caryl Phillips:

>The reason it’s important to have these memorials, these benches, is because it helps to stitch the present to the past. There’s no point just learning about the past – the past is a highway to the present, and that’s why we have to understand our past (Rice 2012b).
Although the trail is quite effective, and seems to be sufficiently made up of significant memorials, one cannot help but question the motives behind the inclusion and non-inclusion of certain sites.

It is quite disappointing that there is nothing associated with Mary Prince in the ADHT, despite her arguably being the most ‘famous’ Bermudian slave, whose book is recognised as a landmark. To this day, two of the houses (the Williams’ and the Ingham’s), which Prince lived and worked at, still exist in Bermuda. However, most Bermudian citizens are unaware of their existence, and if it was not for the insight of the eminent historian Clarence Maxwell, I would have also remained ignorant to the fact. The Williams’ house is mentioned in Bermuda’s Architectural Heritage: Paget (White 2010); the book does briefly touch on Prince’s time there, but it is more of a discussion of the house itself and the family who owned it. The book does not discuss any of the terrors that the slaves may have experienced in this house, or the surrounding houses. In fact, it does quite the opposite and discusses aspects such as Prince’s distress at having to leave the house and family. It does not tell you anything apart from what it wants the reader to know. How can something which seems to be quite purposely selective, be deemed as a reliable source of information? It seems to hide the truth, as a way of maybe making Paget seem more ‘pleasant’. As the houses are private dwellings, it is quite understandable that they are not included in the ADHT. However, it is quite a disappointment that there is not even a single plaque or monument commemorating this legendary figure that makes up such a large part of Bermudian heritage. One explanation of her non-inclusion in the trail could be linked to the great controversy that her History sparked on the island. The Bermudians had a great issue with the authenticity of the Narrative. Perhaps the biggest challenge of its authenticity can be seen in the Bermudian Royal Gazette in 1831, which described the Anti-Slavery Society’s publication of the Narrative as ‘disgusting conduct’ (Royal Gazette 1831). The article rebukes Prince’s narrative and questions its validity by including a number of attestations to the Woods good treatment of their slaves. Her non-inclusion could also be associated with the rumours that the article provoked, which labelled Prince as a licentious prostitute. As Bermuda was, and still is, quite a religious island, these ‘traits’ would have been deemed highly unacceptable, and it is quite likely that people did believe the article. However, the ADHT was established in 2010, and Prince was named Bermuda’s National Hero in 2012, in the same newspaper. This could suggest the development of a sense of forgiveness since 2010, but if that is the case, then why has this forgiveness taken so long? This also shows just how immensely society has changed, and how cultural aspects of society, such as media, reflect these changes.
If controversy is a major factor here, we cannot help but question why Sally Bassett was included in the trail, as she was apparently involved in one of the most controversial events of Bermudian history, the Poisoning Plots. It is also quite surprising that the horrifyingly vivid sculpture of her being burned at the stake is placed right outside the Cabinet office. It is rather astounding that Bassett is commemorated on government grounds, as it was the government who ultimately sentenced her to death. However, the ruling party at the time of the creation of the sculpture was the mainly black, Progressive Labour Party, who may have been more dedicated to the cause, and through this, the sculpture can be seen as reflecting the politics of this particular area. The location and the actual existence of the sculpture have been the topic of debate since its erection in 2008. While many feel that the sculpture was created as a result of a sense of guilt, for killing a woman who protested her innocence till her last breath, others are extremely against the fact that this sculpture, of a convicted criminal, sits on government grounds. While some Bermudian citizens regard Bassett as a hero who stood up for herself, others hold the view that being wrongly enslaved did not mean that she could kill. The different opinions could arguably be associated with different races on the island. To some viewers, the statue may seem quite graphic and ‘over the top’. However, it is often necessary to depict the horrors of such a historical event in a greatly graphic way, in order to make people believe that this actually happened, because often, when only reading texts, it may seem surreal. The sculpture being on government grounds could illustrate Bermuda’s journey to becoming a better place. The government may have erected it here as a way of reminding themselves of what the Bermudian government once did, and this can be quite advantageous as it greatly contributes to the prevention of historical amnesia, as do all of the other memorials in the ADHT. In an email correspondence with Clarence Maxwell, he stated that:

Most people of African descent in the Americas have few inherited memories that reach before slavery: and at least few people recorded a memory of slavery and bequeathed it to their children. There is a historical amnesia that these sights help to rectify (2014).

When looking into why certain sites were added and why certain sites were omitted, I attempted to contact the ADHT directly to discuss their reasoning behind their choices, which I believed would have strengthened my research. However, I received no reply and I think that this tells us more about the initiative, than if they did reply. I believe that their non-responsiveness could suggest a refusal to engage with public interest. However, this could also possibly be because of the ADHT’s lack of funding. Nevertheless, poor funding is something which can be easily solved through fundraising events, something which is not being done to help a cause which makes up such a vast
amount of Bermuda’s history. This is quite shocking due to Bermuda’s great wealth. How can we maintain a proper sense of memorialisation or commemoration if not enough is being done for the memory of such an immense topic?

My actual experience of the ADHT, and the memory of slavery in Bermuda, was nothing short of interesting. I followed the trail and did an immense amount of research on the topic. Although the ADHT was greatly impressive and informative, there were a number of things that I felt let the trail down. As previously mentioned, funding is a major concern. The trail is purely funded by visitors paying a small fee to enter the sites, or by visitor donations, and there is no support from the government, which contributes to the idea that Bermuda is possibly trying to forget its dark past by refusing to financially contribute towards maintaining the memory of its history, which is realistically, the moral duty of both the Bermudian government and its citizens. This poor funding can be seen through the fact that all of the employees were volunteers, and often some of the enclosed sites were not accessible, especially the Bermudian Heritage Museum, due to the fact that they had to close early because of the lack of funding affecting the maintenance of the buildings.

I was also quite dissatisfied at the fact that some of the sites did not adequately discuss and honour the histories of the former slaves that may have lived there. For example, at St Georges Historical Society Museum, despite the fact that house is part of the ADHT and was previously owned by a greatly successful black couple who owned their own slaves, there was no mention of the free-black couple, the slaves or slavery itself. The house was simply there to show off its rich interior and furnishings. The tour guide did not even slightly touch on the topic, and when I questioned her on the history of the house, she had no knowledge of anything regarding slavery. The same can almost be said about Verdmont Historic House Museum, where there was barely any mention of its slavery-ridden past. Evidently, these tours concentrate on the fixtures and fittings of the house to the almost total exclusion of the slaves that made the wealth possible, so that on average there are ‘thirty-one times as many mentions of furniture at these sites than of slavery or those enslaved’ (Rice 2012a,10).

I also found Chesley Trott’s ‘We Arrive’ memorial greatly thought-provoking, and thus endeavoured to meet and interview him about it. He stated that his motivation behind the design was to try and capture the different feelings that the slaves may have felt when they reached the island and were
presented with their freedom. For example, the figures that are looking up towards the sky are thankful for arriving at such a beautiful island and receiving their long-owed freedom, while the figures who seem to be bowing their heads are expressing their eternal sadness towards their horrifying experiences as slaves. He also aimed to portray the feelings of confusion, disarray, and fear, that some of the newly freed slaves may have felt towards what they were going to do next in their lives (Trott 2013). I think that it is a deeply moving and effective sculpture that highly honours the slaves involved in this particular event.

Overall, despite the fact that the ADHT has some serious issues, it is still a great effort in terms of maintaining the memory of slavery in Bermuda, and is exceedingly useful in informing the public of both the white atrocities, and the black achievements that may have occurred. In addition, we can see this through the number of narratives about Bermudian slavery, by both blacks (enslaved or free) and whites, including that of Mary Prince and Susette Lloyd. These narratives have contributed greatly to what we know about the dark history of slavery on the island. However, something more can always be done and something more can always be uncovered, and as a number of historians are still researching the topic today, we can only hope for an increase in memorialisation. Despite all the work that has been done, it is still believed that many people try to oppress this history as ‘slavery is a painful topic in Bermuda as it is such a small society which would rather prosper through harmony than erupt through resentment’ (Campbell 1999, 26).

References


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