

From Cape Verde to Newport

A Failed Attempt to Memorialize a Specifically Rhode Island History of Slavery

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ABSTRACT: This Report from the Field is a *post-mortem* reflection on a statewide memorialization project on slavery that ultimately failed. In this essay, I attribute the failure of the project in large part to conflicting historical approaches and claims to narrative authority over the representation of a specifically Rhode Island image of slavery. Although the organization studied here no longer exists, other nascent grassroots organizations dedicated to the memorialization of slavery and grappling with issues of emerging narratives and competing claims to local memory may derive benefit from my analysis and the proposed “scaffolded conversations” with which I conclude.

KEY WORDS: memorialization, history and memory, Rhode Island Middle Passage Ceremonies and Port Markers Project, Newport, Cape Verde, slavery

Conflict in public history is nothing new. Stakeholders have very different backgrounds, ties to history and memory, and claims to narrative control. In projects about slavery, additional racial and ethnic layers compound the complexity of relationships between stakeholders. Additionally, for public history projects that have a memorialization mandate, questions regarding whose history should be represented further increase the potential for rivalry and infighting. All too often, though, we read and publish the success stories. The failures and the conflicts that led to them remain in the shadows.

This essay is a *post-mortem* analysis of a failed statewide commemorative effort. It examines the events that precipitated the downfall of the Rhode Island Middle Passage Ceremonies and Port Marker Project (RI MPCPMP), a statewide grassroots initiative to commemorate enslaved Africans who arrived in Rhode Island through one of the four documented slave arrival ports—Newport, Providence, Bristol, and Warren. Specifically, I deconstruct the feud over the representation of a particularly Rhode Island history of slavery in a subproject that was internally referred to as the medallion project. On the one hand, the medallion project brought an

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epistemological contest between Rhode Island “history” and “memory” factions to the surface. This contest pitted a “traditional,” “fact-based,” and historically white approach to representing the past against a representation of the past rooted in the popular memories of marginalized communities. On the other hand, the project crystallized a rivalry between two African American descendent communities—one of Cape Verdean descent and one of enslaved Newporter descent—each with different lineal claims to this past. In my view, the failure of this project might have been avoided with greater anticipation of the competing approaches and claims to narrative authority that could surface in a public history project on slavery. I thus conclude this article with three suggested discussions that grassroots organizers can create to help anticipate, understand, and mediate rival claims to authority over history and/or memory in local public history projects on slavery.

A quick note on my specific role in the RI MPCPMP: for almost two years (2016–17), I served on the Coordinating Committee of the RI MPCPMP. A humanist by training, I am a literary historian interested in the intersections of aesthetics and slavery, as well as a department chair in academia. I saw my role during the project as largely tied to help with organizational thinking, contributions to conversations about aesthetic representations, and general facilitation at the statewide level. I had no background in public history or work in grassroots organizations. Consequently, I found myself taken completely aback by the intense conflict that arose in the RI MPCPMP around the medallion project. Throughout the conflict, I struggled to see the roots of the discord that was consuming the organization. With more than two years of distance and reflection, I have realized that it was differing ideological approaches to history and memory that quickly catalyzed defensive postures and crystallized feuding coalitions, thereby bringing down the whole statewide organization. This analysis is, of course, from my vantage point entirely, and thus subject to my own blinders.

On October 28, 2015, the founder and executive director of the Middle Passage Ceremonies and Port Marker Project (MPCPMP), Ann L. Chinn, held a public forum at Roger Williams University to present the MPCPMP to Rhode Island community members. The goal of the organization, established in 2011, was to help local communities “honor the two million captive Africans who perished during the transatlantic crossing known as the Middle Passage and the ten million who survived to build the Americas.”¹ At the time of Chinn’s presentation, the MPCPMP—working with Brown University and the *Slave Voyages Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* created by David Eltis and David Richardson—had identified forty-three ports from which enslaved Africans disembarked on North American soil for the first time. Of these forty-three ports, four were in Rhode Island: Newport, Providence, Bristol, and Warren. These four ports and the commerce affiliated

¹ “Home,” Middle Passage Ceremonies and Port Markers Project, <https://www.middlepassageproject.org>.

with these ports, she explained, contributed to the leading role that Rhode Island played in the transatlantic trade of enslaved peoples in North America.²

Chinn then pivoted to explain the role of the MPCPMP at the local level. Primarily, the organization located ports, prescribed the physical marking of ports, and provided best practices for ceremonies of remembrance of both the enslaved who disembarked and those who perished during the Middle Passage. It neither intervened in the community organization of port markers and ceremonies of remembrance nor did it provide funding or aesthetic imperatives with regard to the port markers. At the time she presented the project to Rhode Island community members, ceremonies of remembrance had been held at seventeen ports and port markers had been placed at fifteen sites on the East and Gulf Coasts. Markers had ranged from small text-based plaques to larger sculptural or architectural memorials. Up until this point, port sites across the country had worked independently and locally; no state had worked collaboratively to achieve the goals of the MPCPMP.

A subsequent interest meeting was held on January 29, 2016, at the Rhode Island Historical Society, organized collaboratively between the MPCPMP and the Brown University Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice (CSSJ). This meeting was open to both concerned citizens and stakeholders of ongoing public history projects on slavery in Rhode Island. Anthony Bagues, director of the CSSJ, recognized the multiple ongoing and dynamic public history initiatives concerning slavery that were currently taking place in the state and suggested, in concert with Chinn, that the time was perhaps right for the MPCPMP to come to Rhode Island.³ Together they floated the idea of a statewide collaboration that could serve three ends: mark the four slaving ports of Rhode Island; loosely weave together the existing and new public history initiatives on slavery in the state to create a statewide movement of historical recovery; and affiliate the initiatives of historical recovery in Rhode Island with the larger national initiative to honor the lives of the African Americans who helped to build the United States. Bagues offered the full support of the CSSJ for this statewide grassroots initiative and indicated that this support should be seen as

2 From 1638 through the abolition of slavery in the state in 1842, Rhode Island ships trafficked over 60 percent of *all* the North American trade in African slaves. By the close of the illicit slave trade in the mid-nineteenth century, Rhode Island ships had transported over 100,000 enslaved people on over 1,000 slave voyages, effectively connecting New England to the West African coast and the Caribbean, and inscribing Rhode Island as a major actor in the global slave-dependent economy. Christy Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 18–21.

3 Anthony Bagues was referring to public history initiatives such as the continuing work by the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice at Brown University; the reinterpretation of multiple sites in Rhode Island to include their role in the history of slavery (including Smith's Castle and the John Brown House); the work by the De Wolf family, including Katrina Browne's documentary *Traces of the Trade* and James De Wolf Perry's work to co-create, in partnership with the Episcopal Diocese Center and the Tracing Center, a Center for Reconciliation in Providence; the continued work of historical recovery by local historical societies as well as by Providence-based Stages of Freedom and Newport-based public historians Keith and Theresa Guzman Stokes; and others.

part of Brown's responsibility for its past.⁴ Although supportive of a statewide collaboration, Chinn stated with premonition: "There are ways in which small-size[d] [groups] like to have things be on their own terms. But hopefully smaller groups could be open to collaboration to find ways and means of making things happen for the good of the entire state."⁵

Attendees heard and enthusiastically embraced both the ideas of local groups working on each of the four port sites and statewide collaboration between these sites. A provisional central organizing committee spontaneously formed at the meeting, and at subsequent meetings it would come to include representatives from multiple organizations across the state such as the Rhode Island Historical Society, Bristol Historical and Preservation Society, the Warren Historical Society, the Newport Historical Society, the Center for Reconciliation, Stages of Freedom, the Fox Point Cape Verdean Heritage Park Project, Smith Castle, the Newport Redwood Library, Brown University, the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), the University of Rhode Island, the DARE Black Studies Program, and the City of Providence Department of Art, Culture + Tourism. In contrast to the other local initiatives of the MPCPMP across the nation, the approach to marking the slave ports in Rhode Island was statewide at the outset.

Over the life of the statewide project, each port site and the organizations associated with it advanced at different speeds and directions in terms of kinds of research, identification of public memorial sites, and conception of appropriate memorials. Around once every month to two months, representatives from the four port groups came together at statewide meetings. After reports on the progress of each port group, these representatives regularly had conversations regarding how to work collaboratively at the statewide level while at the same time preserving the autonomy of each town. Consensus emerged around a need for visual representation at each port site of the local story situated within a larger statewide narrative. Recurring concerns occurred, however, around how to choose a visual marker, or multiple markers, that would both best represent statewide unity while also reflecting the specific histories, memories, and cultures of descendant communities—especially in Newport and Providence.

A number of solutions to these concerns were proposed, from simple to more complex. The simplest solution included a proposal to place a QR code on the local port marker of each town that would link to a central website hosted by the RI MPCPMP with subpages for each port site. A more complex solution included creating a single port marker to be used at each site that would symbolically nod to the specific histories of each town. The group finally agreed that the most desirable way to unify all four port marker projects was to place a small, physical medallion at each site in Rhode Island that would reflect inclusion of the site in the statewide RI

⁴ Rhode Island Middle Passage Ceremonies and Port Markers Project (hereafter RI MPCPMP), Minutes, First Community Meeting, January 29, 2016 (privately archived by Emily MN Kugler in a shared RI MPCPMP Google Drive).

⁵ RI MPCPMP Minutes, January 29, 2016.

MPCPMP. Each port site could then have the liberty to create an additional port marker of its choice, whether a simple plaque, as was ultimately chosen in Bristol and Warren, or a monument, as the Newport group planned to erect. As I explain below, though, as simple as the solution sounded, the medallion project came to crystallize underlying tensions around the representation of a specifically Rhode Island image of slave history. It was approximately at this point—the conception of the medallion idea as a statewide complement to the individual site port markers—that the statewide project imploded. In the sections that follow, I describe the conflict that led to the downfall of the RI MPCPMP and I also attempt to take a step back to theorize what happened.

The medallion idea initially emerged out of a discussion that the Providence port marker group had at its monthly meeting at the CSSJ. In the spirit of full disclosure, I was one of two women who proposed the idea of a medallion to mark the state’s port sites. We explained that medallions could link each port site monument/marker to the larger project. Thinking more long term, we stated that the medallions could also allow for the RI MPCPMP to grow and incorporate other existing initiatives and sites associated with the role Rhode Islanders played in the institutions of slavery and the slave trade. Indeed, this kind of marking could lend itself to historical tours, which could make the history of slavery in the state better known.

In June 2016, a design committee, led by a faculty member from RISD, convened to discuss further the proposal for a statewide medallion. In order to bring attention to the work of the RI MPCPMP at the four port sites, the committee had proposed holding a statewide design competition for the medallion. Subsequently, we drafted a brief for the medallion idea and the statewide design competition to be presented at a statewide meeting in Newport in November 2016. Both ideas were met with universal enthusiasm and approval at the meeting. The discussion among members at the meeting even produced a design idea for the statewide competition: a compass rose. Group members suggested that the compass rose could be “set” to both the precise embarkation and disembarkation points of the enslaved peoples of each town. In addition, a compass rose would emblemize the industries of shipping, whaling, and sailing, on which the local Rhode Island economy was built, and with which the state still identifies today.

The committee member most wedded to the idea of the compass rose was a prominent member of the Providence Cape Verdean community—a community that arrived in Rhode Island through the whaling industry, and that subsequently built itself around longshoring. This individual—a second-generation Cape Verdean American, a historian, and a community activist—had been fighting for years to see the larger Rhode Island transatlantic trade narrative include an emerging history of Rhode Island ship captains and slave traders stopping in Cape Verde. She often reminded group members that Rhode Island, unlike any other slave entry site in the United States, had a unique maritime link with Cape Verde that stemmed from the colonial period through twentieth century mass immigration. Indeed, the great

immigration of Cape Verdeans to Rhode Island happened in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century through the whaling industry; yet, she underscored, in the collective memory of Cape Verdeans in Rhode Island, the complex connections between Cape Verde and Rhode Island went back as far as to the colonial period in Cidade Velha, on the island of Santiago, home to one of the oldest slave-trading markets in Africa.

For this Cape Verdean community leader and historian, the reason why the history of Rhode Island slave trading had not yet come to include the transactions at Cape Verde had two roots. First, few historians read Portuguese and/or had been able to access the tightly controlled, relevant archives in Portugal. Second, as she perceived it and shared with me, Rhode Island academic and historical institutions were implicitly biased. Through their choices of project funding, public presentations, and other research opportunities, these institutions tended to valorize the history of the elite even while working on histories of underrepresented communities. As such, most histories of the enslaved in Rhode Island were, for her, histories of the elite—the slaveholding class—and the wrongdoings of this elite, rather than of the enslaved themselves. In her view, historians worked all too often from the history of famous Rhode Island slave traders down to the history of enslaved people rather than from the oral histories of descendants up to the greater narrative of slavery in Rhode Island. Consequently, the complex colonial history that intertwined Cape Verde and Rhode Island received very little attention because it was not the history of the Newport, Bristol, Warren, or Providence “aristocracy.” Instead, she argued, academic and historical institutions tended to relegate the history of the Cape Verdean community in Rhode Island to the same category as other post-colonial mass African immigrations to the United States. She saw the RI MPCPMP and its promotion of statewide historical recovery as an opportunity to bring greater visibility to Cape Verdean history. She also believed the compass rose could best emblemize the history and voices of African and African-descendent communities specific to the Rhode Island history of slavery *on both sides of the Atlantic*.

Although it seemed that everyone at the Newport meeting initially agreed to the compass rose, it slowly became apparent that key members of the RI MPCPMP were skeptical of highlighting the Cape Verdean link, even though they were reluctant to challenge openly the woman promoting the idea. This opposition first took the form of demands for proof of the historical ties between the port towns of Rhode Island and Cape Verde during the colonial period. These demands came predominantly from white members of the organization, and were epitomized in the actions of the most seasoned public historian of slavery in Rhode Island in the group. Committed to a “just the facts” approach to historical narrative construction, this historian refused to recognize what the Cape Verdean community leader called an “emerging” narrative linking Cape Verde to the slave trading history of Rhode Island.

The aforementioned Cape Verdean community leader, an academically trained historian herself, professed to be accustomed to this type of “just the facts”

challenge, which she typically associated with white male historians. This challenge, she explained to me, was representative of the cleavage she encountered in the field of history. On the one hand existed the historians who saw the work of history as being the reconstruction of the past factually, dispassionately, and on its own terms. In her view, these historians were instantly suspicious of any invocation of popular memory, which they viewed as emotional, and belonging to the domain of heritage and identity. On the other hand existed historians of slavery, such as herself, from underrepresented African American populations, who accepted the role of memory in historical narrative (re)construction. For her, it was precisely popular memory that kept alive stories not found in traditional narratives, including stories (to which she gave credence) of Rhode Island ship captains and crews stopping in Cape Verde and committing atrocities such as the rape and enslavement of local people before continuing on their commercial voyages.⁶ As such, her response to this Newport historian often took the form of a reminder that he did not have access to the most intimate Cape Verdean and African American spaces where memories of the slave trade were transmitted from family to family, generation to generation. Furthermore, she explained that she felt no need to share cultural artifacts with him that might help confirm her narrative because this cultural property belonged to her community and they alone had the right to control any derivative intellectual property. She did not want the cultural property of her community to become appropriated into a narrative that conformed to white models of writing history. Furthermore, she did not want her cultural property to serve the social capital of the historian(s) appropriating this narrative. As she explained to me repeatedly, academics and public historians all too often came into underrepresented communities and “just took.” Though they did so under the pretext of research or public humanities work, more often than not, their real goal was to produce their next article, book, film, or historical tour, all in the interests of their own professional advancement or visibility.⁷ Finally, on a larger scale and for similar reasons, she did not want her cultural property to serve traditionally white institutions. Needless to say, the Newport historian and this Cape Verdean community leader did not see eye to eye.

With distance, it is now clear to me that the conflict between the Newport public historian and the Cape Verdean community leader and historian was a conflict in historical methodologies. The Newport historian was engaging in what he perceived to be a traditional approach to historical narrative construction. David W.

6 The relatively new field of heritage tourism scholarship, focused on the institution of slavery in the United States, is bringing to light issues such as how tourists of heritage sites are more favorably biased toward historical narratives of slavery constructed by white institutions than to memories passed down generation to generation by African American descendants of slavery. See, for example, the special edition of the *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 11, no. 3 (2016), 209–308, entitled *Memory, Slavery and Plantation Museums: The River Road Project*.

7 See GVGK Tang, “We Need to Talk About Public History’s Columbusing Problem,” *History @ Work* (blog), June 25, 2020, <https://ncph.org/history-at-work/we-need-to-talk-about-public-historys-columbusing-problem/>.

Blight articulates this approach in the following terms: “History is what trained historians do, a reasoned reconstruction of the past rooted in research; it tends to be critical and skeptical of human motive and action, and therefore more secular than what people commonly call memory.”⁸ Guided predominantly by a “just the facts” approach to historical reconstruction, the Newport historian did not recognize that the Cape Verdean community leader and historian was arguing from an opposing interpretive approach.⁹ In my own admittedly neophyte readings on memorializing slavery, I found that Stephan Palmié characterized well the Cape Verdean community leader and historian’s understanding of the relationship between memory and history. Explaining that African American scholarly communities adeptly reconfigured memory to become a means of “popular counterhegemonic assertion,” Palmié wrote:

in much of the literature that emerged under labels such as “slavery in history and memory,” the verb “to remember” . . . designates an active, and often deliberate refusal on the part of racially marginalized populations in the United States to surrender collectively held visions of the past systematically devaluated and silenced in institutionally empowered forms of historiography. As a result, memory . . . morphed into a metahistorical category denoting a stance toward and within contests about the public representation of collective pasts.¹⁰

This approach to memory and history argued for opening a space of legitimacy for multiple emerging narratives to be put forth and owned by African American communities, even if underdeveloped or factually incomplete, if those who asserted control over these narratives affirmed their good faith, their pursuit of historical truth, and their counterhegemonic stance.

Operating from the perspective described by Palmié, the Cape Verdean leader indeed felt legitimate in her pursuit to have the Cape Verdean community memory of slavery included in the larger narrative that our organization was constructing. In her eyes, the (historically white) cultural institutions that controlled the narratives of slavery in Rhode Island had repetitively marginalized the Cape Verdean community’s claims of memory kept alive generation to generation. This marginalization made it very difficult to construct a robust evidentiary base for Cape Verdean memory because these institutions had systematically denied the community access to the necessary support and funding to conduct the research. As the sole

8 David Blight, “If You Don’t Tell It Like It Was, It Can Never Be as It Ought to Be,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, ed. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 24.

9 I recognize that academically trained historians might find the Newport historian’s approach to history—characterized by an over-accentuation of “facts” and an under-accentuation of context and interpretation—as typical of amateur local historians.

10 Stephan Palmié, “Slavery, Historicism, and the Poverty of Memorialization,” in *Memory: History, Theories, Debates*, ed. Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 367.

academic historian in a vulnerable African American community, she felt she had no other choice; she had to keep the community's memory alive and recognized through the adoption of a counterhegemonic stance that gave space to African American memory.

It perhaps goes without saying that the Cape Verdean historian's stance put the majority of traditional historians working on the project in an uncomfortable position. On the one hand, they could continue to call for historical evidence of the Cape Verdean tie to Rhode Island slavery, as the Newport historian did. This appeal would necessarily call into question, though, not only the collective memory of a whole African American community but also the Cape Verdean historian's good faith and commitment as a historian in the pursuit of truth. They could also run the risk of being perceived as agents in the repression of African American history in their refusal to accept as history "collectively held visions of the past." On the other hand, they could, in an act of self-abnegation, choose to give space to the Cape Verdean memory of slavery. This space would give voice and historical authority to a marginalized community's memory of the slave trade, thereby elevating this memory and potentially allowing the community to receive the necessary support to produce the historical evidence on its own terms when it could. Giving space to the Cape Verdean "emerging narrative" would set a precedent for the narrative construction by the RI MPCPMP to include memory, and thus potentially the validation of collectively held myths. Neither position was without political ramifications.

Shortly after the Newport meeting, another major challenge to the prominence of the Cape Verdean narrative emerged. This time the confrontation came not on the grounds of history but on the grounds of memory. An influential African American community member organized and led a competing medallion group out of Newport. This community member rejected not only the idea of a compass rose but also the idea of a statewide design competition because he wanted to design his city's medallion himself. His goal was to represent his family and community's memory of slavery in Newport, the town he considered to be the epicenter of the Rhode Island slave trade, by designing a medallion that would feature a historical artifact that had verified ties to the city's enslaved community. The artifact was an image of an African angel, engraved in 1768 by an enslaved stone carver named Pompe Stevens in memory of his deceased brother, Cuffe Gibbs, buried in the Newport Common Burying Ground. This piece was indeed remarkable because it represented the agency of an African American who overtly challenged enslaving laws by signing the gravestone he had carved for his brother. This signature, as well as the signatures by Pompe Stevens on all the gravestones he carved for his family members, symbolically restored the familial bonds that had been severed by enslavement laws.¹¹ For the breakaway medallion group, Pompe

¹¹ Caitlin Galante-Deangelis Hopkins, "The Beautiful, Forgotten and Moving Graves of New England of New England's Slaves," *Atlas Obscura*, October 26, 2016, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-beautiful-and-forgotten-gravesites-of-new-englands-slaves>.

Steven's image of an African angel represented an eighteenth-century African American voice in Newport that stood in direct defiance of white orders to work brutally hard, remain anonymous, and be silent. The leader of this group once told me that growing up in Newport, he never saw a public representation of himself as he walked up and down its streets, but that he regularly encountered the engraving while playing in a cemetery as a child. This image was meaningful to him and could be the only image for the medallion because it embodied the courage of enslaved people specifically in Newport and in Rhode Island. He preferred a medallion that encapsulated the rebellion of a local enslaved person and that spoke to the memories of slavery in Newport, passed down through generations in his family, over an emblem for a medallion that made vague reference to African American voices on both sides of the Atlantic. Furthermore, he felt empowered to promote Pompe Steven's angel because it came from a historical artifact.

The confrontation between the Newport leader and the Cape Verdean historian over the choosing of an image for the medallion represented two competing claims to historical memory. As David Blight wrote: "memory is often treated as a sacred set of absolute meanings and stories, possessed as the heritage or identity of a community . . . [It] is passed down through generations."¹² Indeed, both the Cape Verdean and Newport community members asserted narrative control over the medallion image based on what they affirmed as lineal claims to the past. In the image for the medallion, each member sought to project the narrative of his or her own community as emblematic of a typically Rhode Island history of slavery. Given that these two community members represented the only African American communities with historic roots in the state actively engaged in the RI MPCMP, no third way emerged.

The design competition for the medallion never happened because the medallion project devolved into a dispute between group members supportive of the Cape Verdean narrative and the compass rose and those supportive of the breakaway Newport group championing Pompe Stevens's angel. Furthermore, when the Newport historian threw his weight behind the breakaway medallion group, the epistemological contest between "history" and "memory" became entangled in the dispute. To be sure, a number of group members found themselves in the middle of this multilayered conflict, not knowing how to ally. Nevertheless, the feud within the medallion project kindled latent political and interpersonal conflict within the larger organization. Eventually, these conflicts consumed the statewide organization despite last-ditch efforts calling for cooperation. These attempts could not save the organization because they were not aimed at reconciling the two conflicts (history versus memory; two different lineal claims to the past) that kindled the fire. This is not surprising given that these conflicts, so clear in retrospect, were not declared openly but manifested themselves rather in stances and postures.

¹² Blight, "If You Don't," 24.

In retrospect, three different scaffolded conversations at the outset might have helped our organization move forward through the medallion crisis. One of our first mistakes as an organization, in my view, was to privilege content over form. We devoted much time to public programming on the most recent research on the history of slavery in Rhode Island and New England, bringing in scholars such as Christy Clark-Pujara, Sowande Mustakeem, and Wendy Warren to share their findings. We did not, however, focus enough attention on anticipating and understanding the historical approaches used by underrepresented researchers with intersectional identities who must continually negotiate the precarious divide between insider and outsider perspectives. It would have behooved us to ask our invited scholars to discuss their methodologies and, more importantly, to facilitate discussion in our organization to identify, understand, and reconcile the different approaches that were surfacing.

If we had had initial in-depth discussions about interpretative methods, the opposition between history and memory would have undoubtedly surfaced, as might have the conflict between different lineal claims to memory, which could have led to a second set of conversations specifically on the question of control over the representation of slavery. For these discussions, Michel-Rolph Trouillot's seminal work, *Silencing the Past*, could have served as a starting point for a book club on approaches toward representing history. In my own thinking, I have found particularly productive his concept of authenticity, a concept around which we, as an organization, could have rallied. For Trouillot, historical authenticity "reside[d] not in the fidelity to an alleged past but in an honesty vis-à-vis the present as it re-present[ed] that past" because "historical production [was] itself historical."¹³ Said otherwise, for Trouillot, it was not possible to justify the importance of memory over history or vice versa because all versions of memory and history were produced in time by actual people, and thus needed to be understood as historical themselves. For our group to construct an authentic narrative, we would have needed to recognize the ways in which contemporary power dynamics—such as competing approaches and claims to authority—were playing out in our attempts to represent the past. Additionally, we would have needed to take an explicit position in these power dynamics, following Trouillot's assertion that "historical representations [could] not only be conceived as vehicles for the transmission of knowledge. They [needed] to establish some relation to that knowledge."¹⁴ Had we understood better the concept of authenticity at the outset, we could have discussed how to mediate competing claims to history and memory when they arose. Although these discussions might not have allowed us to avoid conflicts around history and memory, they could have at least given us an agreed upon roadmap or set of best practices for working through them.

¹³ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, ed. Hazel V. Carby (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 145–48.

¹⁴ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 149.

The discussions around the concept of authenticity could have provided the scaffolding for a third set of conversations that I deem the most essential and the most difficult: honest discussion about the contemporary motivations and objectives of each person, committee, and group within the project. As a point of departure, we could have acknowledged, without judgment, that as human beings, we are constantly vying for recognition, power, and superiority in the social marketplace, whether through economic, political, symbolic, or other means. We could then have asked each member, committee, or group to admit in good faith the ways in which they were seeking recognition or attempting to assert power through their work in the RI MPCPMP and the rationales for these actions. Then, we could have worked to align these individual objectives with the advancement of the objectives of the organization. Although none of the three afore-mentioned scaffolded discussions did in fact happen, I would imagine that these three discussions could be beneficial to any similar grassroots organization working on the memorialization of slavery.

In closing, while the RI MPCPMP could have served as a pioneering example of the only statewide cooperation on the marking of slave ports in the United States, the project was not ultimately a failure. Like-minded collectivities have spun out of the larger project and are working on diverse facets of the history of the Rhode Island slave trade. Three of the four port marker groups—Newport, Bristol, and Warren—have continued to make progress independently toward installing port markers in these towns. The rival medallion group spun off the larger RI MPCPMP and became its own entity, now named Rhode Island Slave History Medallions, and it placed its first medallion featuring Pompe Stevens at Patriots Park in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. Cape Verdeans in Providence have refocused their energy on raising funds for their proposed Fox Point Cape Verdean Heritage Park project.¹⁵ A group at the University of Rhode Island has been working on yearly art exhibitions dedicated to the theme of slavery in Rhode Island, and the Brown University CSSJ continues to lead the state and the nation in its groundbreaking public programming.

James Horton and Johanna Kadux wrote: “In the end, the best memorial to slavery may not be the monuments, museums, or historical heritage sites, but what James Young has called ‘the never-to-be-resolved debate over which kind of memory to preserve, how to do it, in whose name, and to what end.’”¹⁶ The initial impetus to write this article was a desire to understand more theoretically the deep conflict that, in a few short months, caused the organization to combust—an

¹⁵ This project seeks to commemorate the Cape Verdean community that was forced to migrate from Fox Point in the 1950s by the expansion of Brown University, an institution famously founded upon the Rhode Island slave trade. The forced migration broke up families, separated friends, and upended the physical organization of an entire community, the pain of which is still felt to this day.

¹⁶ James Oliver Horton and Johanna K. Kardux, “Slavery and the Contest for National Heritage in the United States and the Netherlands,” *American Studies International* 42, no. 2/3 (June–October 2004): 71.

impulse to seek the truth, if I may. In the end, if the RI MPCPMP was not able to bring its statewide project to fruition because of irresolvable epistemological disputes over history and memory, and competing lineal claims to the past, I hope that this article will serve, at least partially, as its memorial to slavery.

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Karen de Bruin is an associate professor of French at the University of Rhode Island. Her current research focuses on memorialization attempts by French Huguenot descendants in the Cape Colony (South Africa) and how these attempts contributed to the construction of a myth of the Huguenot that was ultimately appropriated by Afrikaner culture. For two years, she served on the Coordination Committee of the Rhode Island Middle Passage Ceremonies and Port Marker project and co-produced multiple speaker series and art exhibits. She currently serves on the Committee for the Study of Slavery in Rhode Island at the University of Rhode Island.