

Book Reviews

Behind the Big House: Reconciling Slavery Race, and Heritage in the U.S. South by Jodi Skipper. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2022. xxiv + 218 pp.; illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, paperback, \$27.50; eBook, \$27.50.

Behind the Big House is a short but rich publication that offers a methodology that interweaves reparative justice with public engagement, intellectual activism, and heritage tourism in Mississippi. For readers unfamiliar with the conflicting phrase “heritage not hate,” used to justify celebrating the Confederate past, the introductory chapter plainly explains the author’s standpoint on that idea as a Black feminist who believes that value-free, purely objective research is not possible. Husband-and-wife founders Jenifer Eggleston and Chelius Carter designed the Behind the Big House program in 2012 to shift focus from the traditional tours and stories about the slaveholder and his mansion (aka “the Big House”) in order “to interpret the lives of enslaved persons through the former slave dwellings that are hidden in plain view” (37). Jodi Skipper’s eight-year participation in the program began as an experiential element for her heritage tourism and African diaspora courses for students interested in linking research and community service with public history. Her role quickly developed into a richer collaboration when she became a member of Gracing the Table, a community-campus branch of the original program that organized public events including film screenings, public talks, and historical African American cooking demonstrations and consumption activities with culinary historian Michael Twitty. These activities further address the history and legacies of slavery alongside Confederate nostalgia.

Despite the complex anthropological theories informing Skipper’s praxis, *Behind the Big House* is accessible both linguistically and conceptually. Its greatest value is to scholars and students of public history, providing suggestions via the appendices as how not only to assess and document evidence but also to consider how one develops criteria specific to public history sites. However, the book does not necessarily alienate a nonacademic readership. Skipper’s writing is notably optimistic, drawing in a wide range of readers.

To ground the reader’s understanding of Mississippi’s social landscapes, Chapter 2 explains how the state’s heritage tourism has been a place of conflict. Skipper recognizes the disconnect across racial lines in debates about how to understand and remember the Confederate past. Two disparate views can be true at once.

Skipper critiques traditional state-led tourism for excluding Black experiences or for limiting their full and dynamic stories during and after slavery for the sake of white nostalgia. Moreover, Skipper accuses Mississippi's official tourism of not giving any serious consideration to African Americans as travelers and consumers. Thus, the Behind the Big House program is conceptualized as a "site of intervention" for racial reconciliation, one that recognizes and requires multiple activists to organically cobble together an anti-racist approach to Black heritage tourism or "roots tourism." This strategy targets those who seek out a destination because of an ancestral connection even if it is situated in a hostile environment.

Chapter 3 provides an in-depth history of the Behind the Big House program across multiple sites and details how Skipper, along with her students, became involved. It becomes quite clear that the evolution of the project required multiple forms of bilateral support and collaborative partnerships, including the participation of Afro-culinary historian and chef Michael Twitty. But the strength of the chapter lies in its multivocality. For example, Skipper allows audiences to read historian and educator Rhondalyn Peairs's reasoning for reversing her stance on avoiding antebellum homes in her own words, without the framing of Skipper's interpretation. Equally as enriching were portions of student evaluations about their participation in the project, which resulted in a new appreciation for the ingenuity and creativity of enslaved persons.

Emboldened by the early success of Behind the Big House project, Chapter 4 explores an off-shoot initiative, Gracing the Table, to encourage a form of racial reconciliation between Black and white local residents. Skipper acknowledges that her process may be at odds with traditional historians because it centers a collaborative endeavor that privileges enslaved people's experiences even if they are not necessarily site-specific. Crucially, Skipper rightly allows the reader to learn the motivations for peoples' involvement. Like Skipper, we learn a little of their history and why they chose to participate in this project as well as occasional interludes of reflection from the author. The addition of personal narratives lends a necessary gravitas and clarity that articulates their ultimate desire of healing on both Black and white sides.

The final chapter is another one of personal reflection as a public historian. As successful as the program is, Skipper notes both victories and disappointments. The challenges of a community engagement project might lead participants to question continuing when it is often impractical, difficult, and, as she bluntly states, "rarely fun" (49). A hard question that the text does not answer (although it is often, if obscurely, referenced) is the following: how does one avoid secondary trauma while advocating for a balanced representation of African Americans' past through public history? In general, Skipper's writing has chosen to focus on the necessity and potential benefits of the kind of activism, but perhaps, she may share her thoughts on the difficulties in a future publication.

Behind the Big House blends elements of memoir-writing with a reflection on the process of research in order to privilege Black experiences as part of Mississippi

roots tourism. Throughout the book, Skipper writes with sincerity. Her standpoint as a Black Southern woman, volunteered from page one, is always at the forefront of her praxis. The core of Skipper's autoethnography is an acceptance and critical analysis of the past to actualize a more inclusive future because the personal is political and the political is always personal. However, Skipper's activism is by no means complete, and she does not intend for this book be taken as an inflexible guide for creating and managing public engagement programs that are still grappling with how to address the American South's racist past through reparative justice. The book merely marks her intellectual activism's trajectory to a specified point in her radical process of public history and engagement. After finishing the conclusion, it is obvious that Skipper's work to reconcile the American South's history of slavery and the legacies of structural racism with contemporary heritage tourism—both inside and outside of academia—is just getting started.

Peggy Brunache, University of Glasgow

Where Are the Workers? Labor's Stories at Museums and Historic Sites edited by Robert Farrant and Mary Anne Trasciatti. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022. ix + 237 pp.; illustrations, notes, index; clothbound, \$110.00, paperback, \$28.00, eBook, \$19.95.

The stories of working people and their movements for economic justice are largely missing from schools, media, and heritage institutions. Yet record income inequality in the United States—due to the declining numbers and power of union members in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries—and recent worker militancy against giant low-wage employers such as Amazon and Starbucks call for renewed attention to this history. As a new contribution of the distinguished University of Illinois Press Working Class in American History series, *Where Are the Workers* provides innovative models that document, interpret, and share the local histories of workers and their activism through exhibits, outreach programs, and place-based commemorations.

The essays in *Where Are the Workers* demonstrate to public historians, who are on the front lines of debates about history education, how to remedy the (mis)-remembering of local history and class conflict. As Eric Loomis finds in the dearth of National Park Service labor history sites, the specter of the Smithsonian's Enola Gay debacle has made national funders, museums, and historic sites reluctant to portray controversial events. Since local institutions depend on support from state and local governments, boards, and foundations, translating new scholarship about working people so that it is publicly accessible and appreciated without jeopardizing that support can be challenging indeed. Many of the authors wrestle with how to expose the truth without alienating local constituencies.