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Tina Mullone
Bridgewater State University, tmullone@bridgew.edu

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Reflections From a Plantation Visit

**Tina Mullone**

Down a winding road, flanked by tall fields of sugar cane ready to be harvested and small modest structures, I finally reached a gate leading to the entranceway of the Whitney Museum and Plantation in Edgard, Louisiana. As I drove slowly down the gravel road, a few thoughts and emotions surfaced. I thought about my family’s stories about plantation life and the plantation system that ruled with a brutal tyranny to subordinate Black people during slavery. My emotions also wandered from sadness to melancholy, imagining all that had happened on this land in this place. I parked my car, turned off my phone, and breathed deeply before entering the museum. I was prepping myself to learn more about what could only be described as unimaginable cruelty.

My visit to this plantation was not an accident. In fact, my research interest in dance and how it is shaped by space and the Black female dancing body has led me to several plantations in the southeastern United States and parts of the Caribbean. What makes this plantation unique to my research is that it approaches its subject—slavery—from the perspective of the enslaved. Most plantations tell the story of the owners or their benefactors, not the rich textual narrative and stories of those who suffered. Many fictional accounts of plantation life romanticize it as a “genteel time,” “simpler period,” or stories detailing a “forbidden love” or point to “southern grandeur.” Such a romanticized view probably explains why these spaces are the backdrop for modern weddings or a must-visit destination for history-minded tourists. Although plantation websites frequently recognize slavery’s existence, they advertise it as an ideal place to host nuptials and other social gatherings. The story of the Whitney Plantation, however, abandons this view entirely. It tells us something very different.

The tour begins in what appears to be a holding place for carriages and barn animals but is now a rustic lobby. Several bookshelves of historical works written by some of the nation’s most well-respected scholars fill the center of the room. After paying a small fee for entry, you are given a badge and an audio-guided headset. The badge has a picture of an enslaved child on one side, and the opposite side tells a history of who that child was. Stepping out of the building and into the sweltering heat, you are asked to play the recording and walk to signpost number 1, where resident historian, Dr. Ibrahima...
Seck, greets you in a somber voice and describes in vivid detail the site that stands before you. Listening to the tone of his voice, the cadence, and the emphasis on certain words comes across as a eulogy and testament to the lives lost in a system that knew no ethical, moral, or spiritual bounds.

As I walked slowly along the numbered path toward the next site, the main house (or “big house”) towered alongside several large oak trees. Across from the great house stood several slave quarters, sugar vats of all sizes, and five abandoned rusty mining carts sitting beside a shallow creek. Thinking about these structures and how they were arranged, in this space, in the heat of early June, made me wonder how anyone could endure these conditions, putting slavery in a physical, mental, and emotional context. As I continued through the property, listening to Dr. Seck and Amber Mitchell, Director of Education, on my headset, I learned more about perseverance and determination to survive, as exemplified by the German Coast Slave Revolt of 1811, and the various runaway attempts documented by the Federal Writers Project during the 1930s.

Perhaps the most fascinating part of my tour, and critical to my research, was evidence that the enslaved people would often dance, a view offering a unique counter-narrative to our
common historical understanding. Not only was dance critical to building mental and emotional strength, but it was also a means of recalling past spiritual traditions, reaffirming an identity separate from a life of bondage, and creating community, which is especially important given the widespread practices of breaking apart families. Taken together, dance was critical to survival at a time when so many persons were forcibly stripped of their culture, language, spirituality, and even name.

I was also drawn to Whitney because the arrangement of the building structures on the property still stands as it did 200-plus years ago. Dance scholars note that dance involves not only the body (performer), energy (the flow, weight, and dynamic quality of movement), time (rhythm, tempo, meter), but most importantly, space (where the movement occurs). In fact, space is an essential dance element, affecting the meaning and execution of the dancer’s movement. Because dance can occur in any space, my research has focused on how the physical dimensions of plantations could have impacted the choices of not only where (e.g. church, home, courtyards), but also what was performed and how. The main purpose of my research is to understand how space shapes African dance when performed by the Black female dancing body. In looking at spaces where dances existed among African Americans, such
Tina Mullone is Assistant Professor in the Department of Dance.

as in abandoned buildings or land that no one wanted, my research has ultimately led me to examine plantations and slave quarters.

The Whitney Plantation offers visitors a rare chance to move through and around various intact slave dwellings, allowing me, the researcher, to speculate about how this space might have affected the female Black body and movement that originated there. My research finds that while dancing occurred frequently among people enslaved at the Whitney, the specific details of those dances are unknown. Sterling Stuckey’s influential book, *Slave Culture*, however, allows us to infer that many traditional African dances may have remained somewhat intact but were significantly reshaped due to limits on slaves to move freely in space. For example, the Ring Shout, a ritual dance performed in a circle and practiced by the enslaved, was transformed when slaves began attending four-walled churches, lined with pews that were anchored to the floor. What replaced it is the more common shouting in the aisles, in pews, and risers in the back of the church. These findings suggest that plantations (and slave dwellings), as a space, may have had differing effects on African dance and the Black female dancing body.

The tour concludes on a more spiritual plane. Visitors enter the final building of the property, Antioch Baptist Church, where roughly a dozen statues of school-age children are arranged in the vestibule, down the church aisles, and in the pews. I stood there reflecting, with only the sounds of the gentle breeze, on the innocence of their lives, their faces staring back at me. I offered my prayers and then thought deeply about what I could do in my capacity to create change. Dance is a way to acknowledge cultural identity, bring spirituality into a community and honor the spirits that have left this earth. I hope my creative and scholarly research in dance will honor the fullness of their lives, lest their names be forgotten again.

Children of Whitney (by Woodrow Nash) inside Antioch Baptist Church. Photo: Tina Mullone.