

## CHERYL FINLEY \_AUTHENTICATING DUNGEONS, WHITEWASHING CASTLES(1)

\_For centuries, the castles and forts of coastal Ghana have been important sites of African-European contact and centers of cultural exchange. Built between 1482 and 1784 by rival European nations, these rare examples of late medieval, fortified architecture in sub-Saharan Africa are remembered today for their fundamental role in facilitating the notorious transatlantic slave trade. In all, there are some 60 remaining structures in various states of disrepair along Ghana's coast, which rocky and treacherous promontories provided both defense from enemies approaching by land and sea as well as natural resources rich in lime to build structures that would withstand centuries of human suffering, battle and salty seaside air. Indeed, the paradoxical combination of the shocking history of these manmade sites, the natural beauty of the seashore and the physical grandeur of the architecture has produced the most popular tourist attractions in contemporary Ghana.

"Sankofa" is an Akan word meaning, "one must return to the past in order to move forward." Since 1972, when UNESCO accorded the castles of Cape Coast and Elmina with the designation "World Heritage Monument", the first wave of African-Americans began making pilgrimages to these sites to make sense of their past. Inspired initially by the social and political advances won by the Black Arts and Black Power Movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and later by Alex Haley's popular novel "Roots" that premiered as a television mini-series in 1977, a steady and regular flow of African-American tourists has been participating in, if not shaping a particular type of tourism that has at its center the need to find and validate authentic cultural heritage.

This brand of tourism has been called "roots" tourism, as many of its practitioners seek a symbolic "return" to an ancestral homeland often made visible by the idea or racial memory of Africa as a familial place of origin in the transatlantic slave trade. However, roots tourism isn't confined to going to Africa. Rather many roots tourists find meaningful sites of memory across the Black Atlantic in places like Salvador da Bahia, where African traditions have survived among large Black populations and where corollaries to the dungeons also exist as physical monuments. But beyond the mere sight of Africa as a symbolic motherland, the physical and imposing sites of Cape Coast and Elmina are claimed by roots tourists as tangible and necessary memorials, some of the very few places where material evidence of the legacy of slavery still stands before their eyes and is available to be touched, walked through, and experienced with all of their senses and with the movement of their bodies through the space.

Cape Coast and Elmina are profound examples of Pierre Nora's influential and useful term, "lieux de mémoire," or sites of memory, "where memory crystallizes and secrets itself."(2)

Memory serves a central function in roots tourism. Like heritage it is somewhat of an intangible commodity and a social construction that mediates individuals' experiences, actions and expectations. It is offered to the tourist for consumption and it is the thing that tourists themselves enact and perform in order to authenticate and make their experiences meaningful at the sites. Memory also shapes the "expectations" of roots tourists, guiding their hopes for some sort of connection with their ancestral past. It is the thing that lures them to places like Cape Coast and Elmina, offering a link to their ancestors and the symbolic "and" real representation of the physical monuments as the places from which they came to be part of a Diaspora. Memory thus functions in the creation of a shared racial historical consciousness that roots tourists use to make sense of their past, to sift through the historical elements – the trauma and the triumph –

tied to the lived experience of modern racial formation. At the destinations of roots tourists, [like] the monuments of Cape Coast and Elmina, the concept of memory is active and fluid as in the performative, human function of “re-membering”, that is, putting back together, restoring the body, making whole the body politics. As a bodily practice, memory performed at these sites serves a temporal spatial function by incorporating the awareness of sight, sound, smell, touch and taste to fully experience the spatial arrangement of the memorial.

This essay considers a range of controversial issues that arise when monuments fraught with such historical tension and cultural meaning become the objects of global tourism. It questions the complexities of memory and identity politics at play amongst tourists, museum officials and local inhabitants who frequent the castles and dungeons of Cape Coast and Elmina. It argues that practices of remembering at these sites are necessarily politicized along racial, ethnic, class and gender lines and evidenced by the way individuals and groups “perform” memory in the physical space of the monuments. In doing so this essay considers just whose history and what history is interpreted at these sites. Most African-Americans and Black people from the Diaspora stress that the history of the slave trade, made tangible by the presence of the dungeons underneath the castles, should be the focal point. To the contrary, Ghanaians feel that the long history and multiple uses of the sites should take precedence. Others still concentrate on the aesthetic quality and architectural splendor of the whitewashed buildings. This essay also questions the architectural and interpretative changes to Cape Coast and Elmina that have been made in the name of facilitating tourism. I would like to suggest that the authentic moment that is being offered to the tourist is the memory of the enslaved Africans that left the dungeons centuries ago: the now absent black bodies that become part of the allure of these monuments. It is a perplexing problem that some recent visitors to the castles have passionately vocalized. As one African-American tourist demanded, “Don’t turn our memories into a tourist attraction.”(3) Finally, it is argued that in the current age of global tourism, memory itself becomes a commodity – a thing to be bought, sold, and traded.

### **THE POLITICS OF NAMING**

According to the GMMB, Ghana’s Monuments and Museum Board, there are only three structures designated as castles among the sixty colonial forts that remain on Ghana’s coast: Elmina, initially built by the Portuguese in 1482, Cape Coast, erected by the Swedish in 1653, and Christiansborg, built by the Danish in 1661 at Osu in the capital city of Accra. Of the three, Cape Coast and Elmina are the most popular among tourists and within visible distance from one another just three hours’ drive from Accra. Over the past 300 years, Elmina and Cape Coast have been classified as castles for their style of architecture, enormous size and multiplicity of functions. Distinguished from the more numerous, but smaller forts, the castles have a larger surface area, a more intricate complex of connecting structures, and the ability to house a large number of people. This is evident in the way the space inside of the castle walls was designated and utilized as governors’ quarters; officers’ barracks and mess halls; servants’ cooking facilities; male and female slave dungeons; trading and sales rooms; prison cells; ammunitions storage; churches; schools; courtyards and terraces; look-out towers; cannons; and “doors of no return”.

Many roots tourists feel that calling Cape Coast and Elmina by the name “castle” elides the history of the dungeons underneath these places and that of their ancestors’ experience. With such a name, they say the stories of their ancestors get lost. In their place, fairytale notions of European architectural grandeur associated with a popular understanding of the term “castle”, sugarcoat the fact that enslaved Africans, possibly

their ancestors, were held captive there. This is, however, more than a wholesale rejection of the term “castle”, which is largely used for militaristic strongholds born out of the medieval period. Some roots tourists disagree with the renovation efforts being made in the name of historic preservation. They claim that renovations privilege high architecture and transform the castles into “make believe” places. One visitor from Jamaica cried, “It is horrible to watch this dungeon being turned into a Walt Disney castle!”, referring to coats of fresh white “paint” on the bastions, the addition of potted plants and flowers at the entrance, and the effort to clean and “paint” the inside of the dungeons.(4) The double-edged phrase, “Stop whitewashing our history!” appears frequently in the Visitor Comment Books at Cape Coast and Elmina.(5) Instead of the regular program of painting, upkeep and renovation, some roots tourists and local African-American expatriates argue that these monuments should be left alone to crumble and fall into the sea.

### **PERFORMANCES OF MEMORY, RACE, AUTHENTICITY**

Upon entering Cape Coast or Elmina, visitors are unknowingly invited to participate in several different layered and nuanced performances of memory, race and authenticity. First, they become aware of themselves as a particular type of tourist – Ghanaian national or non-Ghanaian national - based on the price of the admission ticket. Non-Ghanaian nationals pay ten times more than Ghanaian nationals. This designation affects the way that they interact with other tourists and the experience of the guided tour itself.

Each tour guide takes a group of about twenty people, who are usually racially and ethnically diverse and of different ages and nationalities. However, on occasions, some members of the tours complain that they are made to feel uncomfortable, if not unwelcome by other members of the group. The comments of a tourist who distinguished himself as a White American from Connecticut described his uneasy experience of the hour-long tour of Elmina Castle:

“Very impressive castle. Tour was very good. Great views toward the city, beach and ocean. One concern – a man during the tour was distracting and I felt offended by his anti-white sentiments, as he kept saying, ‘white people this...’ I couldn’t understand exactly, but he should respect more other people who are trying to follow the tour guide. Overall, I enjoyed my visit here.”(6)

A Ghanaian member of the same tour group added, “it should be strictly forbidden for visitors in the group to keep making offensive comments that directly or indirectly concern individuals in the group.” Yet incidents such as this one are examples of the pervasive effects of raciology and the legacy of slavery enacted on the world stage today.

Organized tour groups defined either racially, ethnically or by school, church or social affiliation, often request to have their own guide. Many African-American groups ask that no Whites accompany their tour. Moreover, many organized groups of roots tourists demand that Whites be barred from participating in their tour, especially when they descend into the sacred spaces of the dungeons for the first time. It is there that roots tourists seek to claim a privileged status, indeed a certain aura of authenticity. They refuse the presence of Whites, citing that they do not wish to experience the pain of their ancestors with a descendant of the oppressor in their midst. This raises the question of who is allowed to “mourn”: roots tourists, Europeans, or Ghanaians? The guided tours at both Cape Coast and Elmina focus on the points of pain and suffering or strength and resistance to lend a sense of authenticity to the historical and

contemporary significance of the sites. Indeed, the notion of authenticity is central to the allure of tourism as an industry. When choosing a vacation destination, the average tourist goes in search of the authentic native experience, the authentic white sand beach, or the authentic ancient ruins. Cape Coast and Elmina combine all of these notions

of authenticity. In an effort to show “this is how it really was”, the principal highlights of the castle tours perform an authenticating function. Thus, visitors learn about how enslaved women were raped by European traders, governors and officers; the types of torture inflicted upon defiant captives; the presence of the Church inside of the castle; points of architectural interest; the spacious governors’ and officers’ quarters on the upper levels; the stench and horror of the underground dungeons; and the “door of no return”, from which enslaved Africans were led to awaiting ships, never to come back. Most, if not all of the rooms that tourists pass through are empty. The churches have no pews, nor are the governors’ or officers’ quarters decorated with period furniture. This means that visitors have to imagine what it might have been like to live in these spaces. One visitor at Cape Coast demanded: “Please authenticate the Governor’s residence to look exactly the way it was then. I think that will make the necessary contrast with the dungeons.”(7) When I visited Cape Coast Castle in the Summer of 1999, restorations to the Governor’s quarters had begun, and were scheduled to include arrangements of furniture and decorations from the colonial period.

But how might the dungeons be “authenticated”? A visitor to Elmina had one possible solution: “Renovate with models of slaves, sound effects, [and] smells to give authenticity and real feel for what it was like for our ancestors.” But would such an attempt to recreate a sensorium of the unspeakable go as far, especially when the physical architecture of the dungeons themselves is still there to be experienced? How would the curators and designers choose the models to represent the enslaved men and women, and which actors might be asked to create the sound effects?

Some of the changes to the female dungeons at Elmina aim at authentication, especially the new metal bars that were placed in the arched window openings. But the fresh coats of white paint inside of some of the male dungeons have left many visitors in a state of outrage. As one person commented, “The Jews would not paint the ovens in Germany!” Similarly problematic was the renovation of one of the male dungeons at Elmina into a gift shop, replete with merchandising shelves and walls painted with coats of fresh yellow paint. So many visitors complained about it that it was eventually dismantled and moved to an outer service area across from the castle restaurant, the presence of which is also not free from criticism. One of the most positive changes to the dungeons is found at Cape Coast, where an altar to Nana Tabir (a god who is believed to inhabit the rock out of which the dungeons were carved) is decorated with flowers, candles and offerings. It is attended by a priest in white robes and operates as a sacred place where tourists are invited to make prayers to ancestors, pour libations and give monetary offerings.

But in general, the dungeons are left hauntingly bare, with the exception of wreaths, flowers, notes and burning candles left on a daily basis by visitors. And most tourists seem to prefer the dungeons that way. They feel that the emptiness best signifies the absence of the many millions gone, and for them, that is the only authentic way for the dungeons to be represented. Visitors regularly choose the hallowed dungeons to perform rituals of tribute and commemoration or to participate in reenactments of the taking of African captives. In one such reenactment staged by local Ghanaian actors at Panafest 1999, the biennial Pan African Festival of Performing Arts, masks of American presidents, including Ronald Reagan, were worn to portray the slave catchers. The use of these costumes criticized American involvement in the slave trade with a decidedly

politicized contemporary reference to continued American domination over global affairs.

### **PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORIES**

Photography is the leading authenticating action among tourists. Individuals, armed with the most basic disposable camera or sophisticated digital technology, engage in an intense and constant photographic activity that documents historical points of interest, members of their groups or details of architectural or aesthetic curiosity. At Elmina, the courtyard is a popular place for photography, where views of the Portuguese church and the surrounding dungeons can be caught. The most picturesque photographic site at Cape Coast is the balustrade walkway framing the angular row of cannons pointed towards the sea. But photographic activity also reinforces the most perplexing of paradoxes, as one tourist noted: "The disparity between the horrific history of the castle and the natural and physical beauty of the seashore is a difficult mix for the present day visitor." In 1993, the renowned African-American artist Carrie Mae Weems, produced black and white photographs of Cape Coast, Elmina (and Goree Island in Senegal) for the "Slave Coast Series" – filmic diptychs and triptychs that combine image and text to document and memorialize the history of slavery. Even fashion photographers have chosen the castles as stylish backdrops for their glossy magazine work. Inspired by this perverse phenomenon, the noted Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima set the opening scenes of his critically acclaimed film "Sankofa" (1993) among a crowd of tourists about to enter the dungeons at Cape Coast Castle. Told as a flashback, the film follows a Black fashion model, who is there on a shot (wearing a blond wig and Western clothing), as she is psychically taken backwards in time through the dungeon to relive the horrors of slavery as a lesson not to forget her roots. In a strange way, the terror of these monuments becomes aestheticized in the act of recording them on film. The African-American novelist and photographer Richard Wright recalled being hypnotized by the beauty of Elmina in his 1954 novel "Black Power":

"Towers rise two hundred feet in the air. What spacious dreams! What august faith! How elegantly laid-out the castle is! What bold plunging lines! What, yes, taste..." (8)  
His black and white photographs document its balustrades, courtyards, cannon and the "door of no return" prior to the advent of roots tourism and Ghana's independence from Britain.

The dynamics of picture taking at the castles could be a study in and of itself. But, in the case of roots tourism, it has a special commemorative function, a unique familial appeal. As roots tourists gather in groups in front of the cannon at Cape Coast Castle or with the backdrop of the Portuguese Church at Elmina, they are consciously participating in an act of remembering – symbolically taking possession of the past. Authenticating actions such as these signal the creation of novel forms of African diasporic ritual and performance. Their photographs are evidence of a return to the ancestral homeland, of the buildings that still stand as a reminder of the birth of the African Diaspora in the transatlantic slave trade. Back home, they share their photographs with family and friends as proof of having been there, of having walked through the "door of no return". The "door of no return" is the most popular site that roots tourists choose to record on film. At Cape Coast Castle, the "door of no return" is located at the base of the central courtyard, just beyond the female dungeons. At the top of the doorframe, a standard Ghana Museums and Monuments Board label marks the door in neat white letters, "DOOR OF NO RETURN" labeling it as a site of special interest. Other such signposts can be found around the castle signifying the important places that appeal to tourists, for example MALE SLAVE DUNGEON, PALAVER HALL, CONDEMNED CELL, BASTION and so on. One of the climactic moments of the tour, visitors watch in quiet anticipation as the guide opens the heavy, black wooden door for the first time, revealing

the expanse of a motionless sea where enslaved Africans would have been led to awaiting ships. This culminating part of the tour possesses a theatrical feel as the group timidly walks across the threshold to the beach. Waiting there are local children, who know the opening door will reveal a new group of tourists, whom they engage in conversation or ask for money. Some roots tourists choose this spot for pouring libations and saying prayers to the ancestors.

Finally, as the guide motions to the group that it is time to go back inside, he points out another sign above the “door of no return”, which is only visible from the outside upon reentry. In the now recognizable neat white lettering, it reads, “DOOR OF RETURN.” Placed there as a gesture of reconciliation, the guide explains that it is meant to welcome back the thousands of African Diaspora tourists who make pilgrimages to the monuments each year. But is such a “return” to an ancestral homeland that they had never before set foot on really possible? Think about it. What does the new sign, DOOR OF RETURN, really mean? What is lost or gained by renaming the infamous DOOR OF NO RETURN? Does such an act signify an attempt to erase the brutal history of the castles and the dungeons underneath them in the name of facilitating tourism? Does it mean that time – 400 years – has healed the wounds? Is it asking us to forget and move on? Perhaps another way to get at this question is to return to the Akan word “Sankofa”, meaning “one must return to the past in order to move forward.”

[1] This paper is based on research undertaken in Ghana in 1999 and interviews conducted with local residents, museum officials and tourists. It was presented at the 2002 annual meeting of the College Art Association in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA on the panel “The Tourism of Architecture/The Architecture of Tourism,” organized by D. Medina Lasansky and Brian McLaren. Earlier versions of this paper have published as “The door of (no) return,” “Common-place” <[www.common-place.org](http://www.common-place.org)>, vol. 1, no 4, July 2001, and “Authenticating dungeons, whitewashing castles: the former sites of the slave trade on the Ghanaian coast,” in D. Medina Lasansky and Brian McLaren, “The tourism of architecture/The architecture of tourism”. London: Berg, 2004.

[2] Pierre Nora, “Between memory and history: les lieux de mémoire.” “Representations” 26: 9, Spring 1989

[3] Visitor Comment Books, Cape Coast Castle. 1998.

[4] Visitor Comment Books, Cape Coast Castle. 1998.

[5] Ibid. The phrase, “Stop whitewashing our history”, was popularized by the writings and activism of the influential expatriate African-American Imahkus Vienna Robinson. See Imahkus Vienna Robinson, “Is the Black Man’s history being whitewashed?”, “Uhuru” 9: 48-50, 1994.

[6] Visitor Comment Books, Cape Coast Castle, 1998.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Richard Wright, “Black Power: a record of reactions in a land of Pathos”. NY: Harper Perennial, 1995 -1954 reprint, p. 354.