Black and White Simulacra: Charleston's "Cabbage Row"

by

Charlotte Lindiwe Emoungu

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in City Planning at the MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

“The Insider’s Guide to Greater Charleston,” one of the most widely accessible tourist guidebooks of architecturally restored Charleston, South Carolina distinguishes sites of African-American history from sites of general interest. “Cabbage Row,” or 89-91 Church St., Charleston is noted by ‘The Guide’ as a site of African-American history. Of particular interest is the tour guide’s descriptive passage of Cabbage Row which states: “anyone familiar with the opera [Porgy and Bess] and its stage settings will see that this place ... could easily have been the original scene [my emphasis].”

Curiously, this site of African-American history refers to a fictional work. Furthermore, this thesis claims that this site is intertextual. It is both a site of African-American and ‘general’ history. This thesis asserts, then, that the visual authenticity of this site (in both its African American and “general” historical senses), is mediated by the fictional representation of race as exemplified by the novel Porgy and the opera Porgy and Bess.

Thesis Supervisor: Lawrence Vale
Title: Assistant Professor
Acknowledgments

I thank my mother, father, and sister Walu.

In honor of my mother and father, Winne and Paul Emoungu, who have taught me to think critically since the age of three.

Dedicated to Juli for believing in me.
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“The Insider’s Guide to Greater Charleston,” one of the most widely accesible tourist guidebooks of architecturally restored Charleston, South Carolina distinguishes sites of African-American history from sites of general interest. “Cabbage Row,” or 89-91 Church St., Charleston is noted by ‘The Guide’ as a site of African-American history. Of particular interest is the tour guide’s descriptive passage of Cabbage Row which states: “anyone familiar with the opera [Porgy and Bess] and its stage settings will see that this place ... could easily have been the original scene [my emphasis].”

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Chapter 1

Introduction

...and the rest was history.

The expression, or more aptly the “rest,” implies a before and an after. The moment of its utterance is the coincidence of the cultural superiority of hindsight, and the privileged experience of an originary moment. In fact the expression inaugurates history itself, that peculiar mystification of retrospection. The immediacy of this originary moment—of the beginning of the rest—is occasioned by nostalgic desire. Consider this origin of history. Consider the origin of this place: Charleston, South Carolina. The Charleston of today is the restoration of the following burnt city as Kenneth Severens recounts in his book Charleston Antebellum Architecture and Civic Destiny:

A Charlestonian on military duty observed the fire from Fort Sumter: “I have spent a night of such agony that I wonder to find this morning that my
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Figure 1-1: Charleston after the fire of 1861.
hair has not turned gray. We all thought here, that an insurrection had broken out, and that the whole city was doomed.” That blacks would one day torch the city had been a constant fear from the time of the Vesey conspiracy to John Brown’s raid on the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry. And even though the fire was not part of such a plot, it still could have providential meaning: “Is it true that the fire was accidental? If so, it surely seems that God has foreordained our chastisement.” Charleston devasted was still capable of evoking historic associations: “Certain portions of the burnt space, where pieces of some columns had been piled on one another, reminded me of Pompeii.”...

Severens describes the impression of another viewer who took a stroll through the city after the fire:

With the moonlight streaming through the windows [of the Circular Congregational Church] and the monuments gleaming beyond, the effect was beautiful and reminded us of the Coliseum. While the front view with the row of [Corinthian] columns standing as if to guard the sanctuary, brought the ruins of the old Grecian temples vividly before us, as did the broken arches of the [South Carolina] Institute Hall. The Cathedral [of St. John and St. Finbar] is also very beautiful, the walls all standing and the spires all along the side reminded me of the statues on the Vatican while the [diocesan office] was that of some old Gothic minister—indeed everything is so transformed by the work of a single night that it seems as if we were carried centuries back and stood among the ruins of some ancient city.

Nevertheless, the devastation of Charleston’s fire of 1861 was resonant with the losses Charleston endured during the Civil War. Various other Charlestonians stated:

...“Our city has received a terrible blow, which it will take the work of years to repair.” The anniversary of secession [of the Southern states from the Union during the Civil War] passed without joyous celebration, since “...A dire calamity has laid in ashes a large portion of our beautiful city, and hundreds of families are suddenly deprived of their cherished homes.”
Perhaps the most desperate response was the one ... recorded a month later: “A member of the legislature declared exultingly in the House that he was glad of the fire, as it would make it easier to burn the rest of the town if the Yankees were likely to become masters of it.” Charleston did not have to wait for the Union occupation of 1865; by the end of 1861 it had already experienced a crushing defeat.¹

...and so was the traumatic origin of this historic place, historic now after a fire. This is the origin of the restored Charleston of today, saturated with the desire of nostalgia and longing. The contemporary restoration of Charleston attempts to evoke the *jouissance* of the Charleston just prior to its burning. The passage above also exemplifies a relation between race, historicity, and the historic imaginary (the imaginary image evoked by the likeness of the restoration). The imfamy of blackness occupies the same originary moment with the rapture of nostalgia, as well as the mythic imaginary of historic authenticity and resemblance.

### 1.1 Charleston

In the spring of 1670, during the reign of King Charles II of England, Charleston was founded by the Lords and Proprietors of Carolina.² Charleston, an Atlantic coastal town, rests at the base of a peninsula between the Ashley and Cooper Rivers.

The institution of slavery has existed in Charleston, since the late seventeenth century, when the city was known as Charles Town, up until its abolition in 1865 at the end

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

of the Civil War. In 1696, "...Carolina’s first comprehensive slave law was deemed necessary on the grounds that blacks had ‘barbarous, wild, savage Natures’." ³

In addition to slavery, Charleston has experienced many fires since its founding. In February 1698, Charles Town, in the waning stage of a half-year long yellow fever epidemic, experienced an earthquake and a resultant fire. In the fall of that year, legislation “for Preventing Fires” was ratified.⁴ The legislation mandated preventative building measures such as stone or brick buildings.⁵

In December of 1737, an immigrant, Samuel Dyssli wrote to his relatives in Switzerland that “Carolina looks more like a Negro Country than like a Country settled by white people.”⁶ In the early-to-mid eighteenth century, Charles Townians were apprehensive about the number of blacks slaves that populated the city and countryside. There was widespread fear of slave insurrections.

Rumors of slave plots sent periodic scares through Charles Town until the American Civil War. Some of the conspiracies were more imagined than real: garbled stories reported second or third hand, which reached whites nervous enough already over the lowcountry’s black majority, or deliberate tales started by whites to justify making examples of blacks as a warning to slaves who might nurture thoughts of rebellion.⁷

Throughout the decade 1739-1749, “calamities and misfortunes”⁸ beset Charles Town. On Sept 9, 1739, Charles Town experienced what was then the worst and “bloodiest
slave revolt in Colonial America." The slaves allegedly had a plan to capture the city of Charles Town, and perhaps would have succeeded were it not for an informant.

In the summer of 1740, a year after the enactment of a more restrictive slave law, Charles Town experienced another fire. Many buildings perished during this fire, but the fear of slave incendiarism persisted. In 1741, a mulatto slave was caught trying to burn down a house on Union St. Though she was "arrested, tried, and convicted within forty-eight hours," she was pardoned when she named an accomplice, a slave named Boatswain. "At his trial, [he] confessed that he .. 'looked upon every white man he should meet as his declared enemy':" He was burned alive.

In 1752, a hurricane hit Charles Town, and raged for several hours. Several people noted that the hurricane was the worst to have struck Carolina. In the years prior to the American Revolution, Charles Town was at the center of heavy slave trading. Slaves from Angola and Gambia were imported and sold at premium prices. In 1765, another rumor of a slave rebellion and planned massacre "rippled across Charles Town." This rebellion was supposed to have happened Christmas Eve. However, Henry Laurens, a Charlestonian, observed that the rumor resulted from some slaves shouting "Liberty!" in the streets "in imitation of 'their betters' who had done so" earlier.
In 1778, during the American Revolutionary War, just prior to its seige by the British Army, Charles Town was devastated by yet another fire that started “in a kitchen hired out to some negroes.”¹⁹ When all was said, done and burnt to the ground, two “British sympathizers” were hung after being tried and convicted of arson.²⁰

Upon winning independence from Britain, Charles Town’s name was formerly changed to “Charleston,” the name the city has today. Since its founding, however, Charleston has been known as a “city of disasters,”²¹ as the several fires, epidemics, and hurricanes attest. From the end of the revolutionary war until the end of the American Civil War, Charleston was to experience more fires, hurricanes, epidemics, and fear of slave conspiracies. The most notable of these kinds of disasters were, as we shall see, the Vesey Conspiracy of 1828 and the fire of 1861. The fire of 1861 destroyed the last of pre-Civil War Charleston. During the twentieth century, Charlestonians began to meticulously restore their city. In 1931, Charleston became the first city in America to have an historic district.

Today, Charleston’s historic district extends from 375 Meeting St., Charleston’s Visitor Center, to the Battery, a wooded park on the tip of Charleston’s peninsula.

1.2 Background

When I began this thesis project, I wanted to investigate what I thought I had seen in a slide presentation: a slave auction block which had been restored in Charleston,  

²⁰ibid.  
²¹ibid., pp. 216-17.
Figure 1-2: Map of present day Charleston’s historic district.
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South Carolina's historic district. Prof. Gary Hack gave a slide presentation of Charleston for the Department of Urban Studies' Course Introduction to Urban Design and Development. Charleston exemplified an historic city, the prototypical city under investigation that day. I was intrigued with this block, and taken up with the questions it provoked. I felt that the restoration of this block in the service of tourism—the cruel irony of its situation near what looked like an outdoor dining area (i.e. with waiters, etc...)—was politically extraordinary. I also wondered what, with regard to multiculturalism, was the intention of restoring such a block?

Was the restoration intended as a multiculturalist gesture of critical reflection upon an institution of slavery? Did the irony of its restoration reflect a deliberate cynicism? Or was its restoration ironic at all? Indeed, the choice of restoration versus preservation was to me a scandalous one.

Restoration eliminates any trace of time. Preservation, as its name implies, preserves indexical traces of time, of the past from which the preserved object derives, and from which it has decayed. Furthermore restoration is controversially distressed when its object is slavery. Why restore a built relic of slavery? Why eliminate what is widely regarded as a period of redemption between the end of the American Civil War and the era of Civil Rights?, unless the restoration of the block was a more subtly sophisticated critical gesture. Could it have been? Did the restoration wage the critique that the racist ideology that informed slavery was “still with us”? Or was the block blithely and unabashedly restored as an uncritical valorization of the Old South? Or did the block defensively counter the impulse to censor references to slavery and affirm its status as a reminder of that ‘peculiar institution’?

\footnote{22Severens.}
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Upon further reflection I began to realize, during the preliminary phases of my thesis preparation, that I was intrigued not so much by the block itself, as by the conspicuous absence on the top of it. I began to think also that the restoration of the block, as opposed to its preservation both enabled and dramatized this absence; and that this absence took the shape of a horrible body, a body that has long since been gratefully relegated to the pages of history. And the fact that this lurid voyeurism was so intimately grounded in historic restoration—this particular mode of architectural visuality—suggested to me a relation between the image of this historically restored city monument, and race.

1.3 Working Hypothesis and Site-Specific Case Study

Methodology

I took a research trip to Charleston in January of 1994. I went looking for this slave block and any other restored monuments of slave history. I thought of Charleston as a bizarre concoction of noveau sensitivity (e.g. the use of the palatable “African-American” in tourist literature to distinguish racial history of architectural sites) and an uncritical, reminiscent look at the Old South. I wondered, then, if ‘African-American’ signified a departure from a discourse of the stereotype, or whether its usage signified a newer incarnation of the stereotype in an altered ideological context. In terms of this bizarre concoction of “political correctness” and an uncritical valorization of the Old South, what could a history of slavery, as produced within the tourist literature, mean?

23By tourist literature I mean the most ubiquitous literature accessible, that which thousands of tourists peruse and buy upon visiting Charleston (i.e. material which may be purchased in an
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1.3.1 Sites of ‘African-American’ History

The Slave Mart Museum The Slave Mart Museum at 6 Chalmers St. used to be a place where slaves were auctioned off. It sits between a fire station and an old, nondescript house. The Slave Mart Museum is so named because it used to be a museum of ‘African-American’ slave history. The “Insider’s Guide to Greater Charleston” describes the site as such: “[d]uring slavery, Charleston passed an ordinance which said all slave sales had to be held in licensed market buildings. One of these buildings still exists on the downtown cobblestone street called Chalmers (between Church and State). For many years, it was a museum for black folk art and open to the public. The building has been vacant for several years.” The museum is now closed.

As I peered through the window of the building, I noticed that it was completely unfurnished. I notice on the outside said that it was closed. I later inquired as to the status of the museum at the Charleston Visitor’s Center. I was told that one could see

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24 I wonder if the pun was intended.
Figure 1-4: "Slave Row" at Boone Hall Plantation

the inside of the building upon taking a special, privately managed 'African-American' tour of Charleston.

The Slave Houses at Boone Hall Plantation  While not inside the historic district, the Slave Houses at Boone Hall Plantation are featured by the "The Insider's Guide" as a site of 'African American' slave history. The tourist literature makes a consistent distinction between the plantation itself (a site of "general history") and the slave houses (a site of African-American history). The slave houses often occupy a completely different section in most of the tourist literature than Charleston's 'history proper': a further corroboration of the distinction of histories that we have established as exemplary of postmodernism. This distinction is also reminiscent of the hierarchical distinctions made in the Columbian Exposition. Although contemporary tourist literature does not formulate a 'value judgement' with regard to racial/historical difference, there is arguably a hierarchical distinction implied by the designation 'African American' as opposed to 'history proper' in Charleston's tourist literature.
An otherwise comprehensive tour of the plantation explains that most of the slave records, logs, books, etc. were burned and/or otherwise permanently lost. Slave Row, as it's called, is a row of nine remaining slave cabins. The row extends along the quarter-mile lane from the edge of the plantation grounds to the plantation mansion. These cabins housed skilled slaves (e.g. carpenters, blacksmiths, etc..), and so were closer to the owner's mansion than the cabins occupied by unskilled field hands. As I peered through the window of these cabins, they were completely unfurnished. Interestingly, these cabins were preserved as opposed to restored as was the plantation owner's mansion. The plantation owner's mansion was completely restored on the inside as well as on the outside. Indoor furnishings date from the spectrum of periods through the plantation's history of ownership.
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The Hanging Tree  This tree was the place in which they traditionally hung outlaw slaves. Prompted by a pamphlet\textsuperscript{26} advertising an African-American tour of Charleston, I searched Charleston and particularly the area of the batter (a park area by the sea) for this tree. I initially asked the tour guides at the Visitors' Center where the tree was. None of them knew the exact whereabouts of the tree.\textsuperscript{27} I note here that I asked all of the tour guides present at the visitors' center on that particular day at that particular hour as they were gathered outside of the center with their respective tour groups preparing to embark on tours. I asked another tour guide once on the battery (see Fig.-1-5). He redirected me to a fork in the middle of Avery St. There was an unlabeled tree at this fork. It was very young (hardly 10 ft. tall), and so could not possibly have been the tree from which slaves were hung. No one I asked could confirm the whereabouts of this tree.

Cabbage, or "Catfish" Row  The buildings at 89-91 Church St., or the area of Charleston known as Catfish Row (see Fig.-1-6), are today a site of African American history in the restored Charleston. According to the tourist literature, this place was the inspirational setting of the book \textit{Porgy} (the story of a tragic romance between a legendary local beggar, Porgy, and a woman Bess), written by Dubose Heyward, and later the Gershwin opera/adaptation \textit{Porgy and Bess}. A passage in the "African American" history section of The "Insider’s Guide" describes the site as follows:

\begin{center}
CABBAGE ROW
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{26}This pamphlet certainly deserves an analysis of its own were it not for its non-status as a pamphlet per se: that is the "pamphlet" I refer to was merely a trifold xerox advertising African American sites: a hanging tree, a bus tour to see them. Sadly, the bus tour never made itself available.

\textsuperscript{27}Furthermore, despite my most rigorous attempts to locate in the tourist center, various libraries, etc., no information as to the whereabouts of this tree exists in accessible tourist literature.
This downtown area was claimed as the inspirational setting for Dubose Heyward’s 1925 book, Porgy, and George and Ira Gershwin’s beloved folk opera Porgy and Bess (which premiered in 1935). “Cabbage Row,” the scene of the story, got its name from the vegetables regularly sold by area black residents from their carts and window sills here. Today, this section houses quaint little shops, but anyone familiar with the opera and its stage settings will see that this (place and the alleys around and behind it) could easily have been the original scene. Was there ever a real Porgy? Was the story based on truth? Many Charlestonians recall a poor, crippled man who lived here (in the early 1920’s) and who used a small goat cart to get around. The other details of the story are hard to pin down on any one individual. But Charleston certainly had enclaves of black families who struggled against very difficult times. And their saga of survival and social interdependence was (and is) inspiring. Charleston clearly has hurricanes—and in those days storms struck with little warning. And surely then, as now, the ugly specter of drugs and violence influenced these people’s
In the mid-to-late forties, Samuel Galliard Stoney, a Charleston preservationist, described the site as such:

If you will pass up Church St., you will find in the block north of Tradd on either side of the Heyward House two other representative Charleston buildings. Both are composites of residences and business establishments. The more northerly of these, once a lively negro “alley” still keeps its old contemptuous nickname of “Cabbage Row,” which Dubose Heyward transposed into “Catfish Row” when he transposed a *simulacrum* of the building to the water front to house “Porgy” in his celebrated novel. ...Church Street is peculiarly rich in history. However, it is only one of any number of such regions that you find all about Charleston illustrating various periods of history [my emphasis].

This simulacrum of Catfish Row, portrayed by Dubose Heyward in his novel Porgy, is suggestively recalled in the descriptive passage in the tourist guide: “...anyone familiar with the opera and its stage settings will see that this place ... could easily have been the original scene.” I place these sentences in this particular order deliberately, in order to dramatize the vertigo of history enacted by this particular site. While the authors of the passage presumably designate the “original scene” as the “Catfish Row” of 1925, that upon which the novel was based, the difference between this site of ‘African-American’ history and the ‘general’ history of Charleston-proper relativizes the time of the original referent. In other words, the restored buildings today are, in the generalized historical sense, undoubtedly based on their imagined appearance during late-eighteenth century and antebellum Charleston. In the text of ‘African-

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29 Samuel Gaillard Stoney, *This is Charleston: Survey of the Architectural Heritage of a Unique American City* (Charleston: Carolina Art Association, 1946), p. 27.
American history, the restored buildings' original were the buildings as they appeared in 1925, the year in which the novel took place (see Fig. 1-7).

The original scene? Which original scene? The 'original scene' could refer to the original Cabbage Row of 1925 (the year in which the novel Porgy was written, or it could refer to the block of buildings during antebellum Charleston prior to the burning of Charleston, or it could refer to any number of times upon which the restored scene could have been based. It should be noted that although there have been many adaptations of the opera Porgy and Bess, the tourist literature simply suggests that if you have seen the opera without specifying which particular version, and/or if you have read the book, you may imagine what this site must have looked like. Therefore, I claim that a more general consideration of race (which is certainly thematically common to every single adaptation of the opera) and its stereotypical and fictional representation is relevant here.
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1.3.2 Theoretical Approach

Furthermore, the distinction of a site of African American history which is ultimately fictional is particularly intriguing. Certainly, 'The Guide's' conflation of a fictional text with the "these people's" experiences defies the factual primacy of history. Moreover, both the fact that the novel itself was written by a white man, and the fact that the opera was conceived by two white men defy the notion of an African American experience originating from an African American author. Indeed, as I attempt to reach back behind the facade of "Cabbage Row" and retrieve the authentic African American, I come up short. When I attempt to verify the cultural, linguistic, ethnic purity of this experience, I come up with virtually nothing that is not always already mediated by its white counterpart.

When I refer to the absence of African American historic sites, I am referring to the lack of unmediated (in the sense explained above) African American historical sites. Two histories cohabit "Cabbage Row." The site documents two experiences. There are two historical texts architecturally interwoven. Some of the placards on the buildings of Cabbage Row indicate historical events of general significance (e.g. architectural style, from what period the building dates). Other placards just say "Porgy," "Bess," "Catfish Row." This double racial signification, white and black, corroborates the claim that this particular site of African American history is always already mediated by its racial counterpart. And vice versa. The tourist guidebook invites us to remember, for an instant, the settings of Porgy and Bess such that we may remember what the site looked like both in the novel and the opera, at the time of the novel's conception, and I will argue, prior to the novel. The instant of fictional, stereotypic representation of the African American in the instance of Porgy and Bess, I argue, enacts the nostalgic desire for the imaginative conception of the
Homi Bhabha’s poststructuralist, postcolonial theorization of the stereotype is the theoretical model of ‘race’ from which I depart. Bhabha’s model specifically illustrates the mediation of whiteness by the stereotype. \(^\text{30}\) Alfred Hitchcock’s 1958 film *Vertigo* provides an analytical model of the simulacrum, its relation to historic restoration and the stereotype. Because we know from one of Charleston’s architectural surveys that this fictional adaptation of Cabbage Row is regarded as a simulacrum, I thus examine the simulacrum and its implications with regard to the notion of “origin.” Joel Fineman’s “The Structure of Allegorical Desire” puts for the structure of the allegory. Its citation here corroborates the relationship between the literary structure of the allegory and the visual structure of the simulacrum.

The thesis is segmented into five chapters, the first of which establishes theoretical and empirical background.

- Chapter two chronicles Charleston’s history of slavery from the Vesey Conspiracy through its abolition at the end of the American Civil War. This chapter establishes the allegorical similarity of *Porgy* with the Vesey conspiracy. This allegorical similarity is, moreover, a function of the stereotype.

- Chapter three introduces the concept of the simulacrum and the allegory. Alfred Hitchcock’s 1958 film *Vertigo* is used to illustrate the concept of the simulacrum specifically as it relates to historic restoration and the stereotype. Joel Fineman’s “Structure of Allegorical Desire” is also introduced to verify the structural similarity of the simulacrum and allegory.

\(^{30}\)However, I do not feel that his theory does the converse which, as I conclude, is a problem.
• Chapter four formally analyzes today’s Cabbage (or is it “Catish?”) Row in terms of the simulacrum, and asserts (a) that the representation of the African-American is one of absence and allegorical displacement, and that the parallax figure of the stereotype (i.e. the settings of the opera *Porgy and Bess*) facilitates the historic authenticity of Charleston’s restoration.

• Chapter five, the epilogue examines the notion of Charleston’s “real” African-American history, as opposed to the falsity of mis- and underrepresentation within Charleston’s restored architectural schema.
Chapter 2

Charleston’s Slave History

My dear Betsy

...On Friday 29 of the unfortunate creatures
are to be hung—it is most horrible—it makes my blood curdle
when I think of it

but they are guilty most certainly.... Your Affcly—Anna.

— Anna Hayes Johnson, daughter of United States Supreme Court Justice William Johnson—who on June 21 had questioned whether the conspiracy was as extensive as the court maintained—in a letter of correspondence to her cousin Betsy (1822).¹

The ”bloody sacrifice” of which he so insolently
speaks might have been prevented by a few peace offerings
of such lambs as he and his faction can produce.

— Charleston City Gazette, August 16, 1822.²

²As quoted in Starobin, p. 89.
We are happy to state that the tranquility of the city is now restored.

— Charleston Courier, August 12, 1822.³

...[T]he females were to be reserved for worse than death.

— Correspondence of John Potter, a Charleston Financial agent to Langdon Cheves, a South Carolinian residing in Philadelphia (1822).⁴

2.1 The Vesey Conspiracy

In 1822, Denmark Vesey, a freed slave, and nine others were sentenced and executed for plotting a Slave insurrection in Charleston, S.C. The following is a brief summary of Vesey’s life prior and up through the conspiracy:

As Denmark Vesey has occupied so large a place in the conspiracy, a brief notice of him will, perhaps be not devoid of interest. ... During the revolutionary war, Captain Vesey, now an old resident of [Charleston], commanded a ship that traded between St. Thomas and Cape Francais (San Domingo).

...In 1781, he took on board at St. Thomas 390 slaves and sailed for the Cape: on the passage, he and his officers were struck with the beauty, alertness and intelligence of a boy about 14 years of age, whom they made a pet of, by taking him into the cabin, changing his apparel, and calling him by way of Telemarque (which appellation has since, by gradual corruption, among the negroes, been changed to Denmark, or sometimes Telmak.) On the arrival however, ...Vesey had no use for the boy, sold him among his other slaves, and returned to St. Thomas. On his next voyage to the Cape, he was surprised to learn from his consignee that Telemarque would be returned to his hands, ...unsound and subject to epileptic fits. According to the custom of trade in

³ibid. p. 88.
⁴ibid. p. 71.
that place, the boy was placed in the hands of the king's physician, who decided that he was unsound, and Captain Vesey was compelled to take him back, of which he had no occasion to repent, as Denmark proved, for 20 years a most faithful slave.

In 1800, Denmark drew a prize of 1500 dollars in the East Bay Street Lottery, with which he purchased his freedom from his master, at six hundred dollars, much less than his real value. From that day to the period of his apprehension he has been working as a carpenter in this city, distinguished for great strength and activity. Among his colour he was always looked up to with awe and respect. His temper was impetuous and domineering in the extreme, qualifying him for the despotic rule, of which he was ambitious. All his passions were ungovernable and savage; and, to his numerous wives and children, he displayed the haughty and capricious cruelty of an Eastern Bashaw. He had nearly effected his escape, after information had been lodged against him. For three days the town was searched for him with out success. As early as Monday, the 17th [of June], he had concealed himself.

It was not the night of the 22nd of June, during a perfect tempest, that he was found secreted in the house of one of his wives. ...If the party [of arresting officers] had been one moment later, he would, in all probability have effected his escape [my emphases] ...  

The court transcripts document the trial proceedings in great detail and include practically every word uttered by the informants, witnesses, and defendants. I here quote part of these proceedings at length:

...On Tuesday, the 18th of June, the Intendant of Charleston, informed the authors, that there were several colored persons, in confinement, charged with an attempt "to excite an insurrection among the blacks against the whites," and requested them to take the necessary steps to organize a Court for the trial of those criminals.

...Before the Court proceeded to any trial, they were engaged some time, in examining all the testimony they could obtain, in order to ascertain how means, of the existence of a plot, they laid down the rules and principles on which the trials should be conducted. ...The Court, on mature deliberation, determined that the public generally, or in other words those, who had no particular interest in the slaves accused, should not be present at their trials[.]

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5 Starobin, pp. 30-31.
...Among other reasons, which induced this course, were the following: because several witnesses had volunteered their testimony, under a solemn pledge of secrecy, and because the further detection of the plot, would be greatly impeded, if not entirely stopped, by the accused being apprised of the information against them, and being thus enabled to effect their escape before they could be apprehended.

...Every possible care was taken by the Court throughout the trials, to prevent collusion between the witnesses, or either of them knowing what the others had testified to. Those in prison were confined in different rooms, or when, from their being wanted in Court it was necessary to bring them in the room adjoining that in which the Court was sitting, they were put together in one room, a confidential non-commissioned officer of the City Guard was placed in the room with them to prevent their communicating together. They were brought in and examined separately, none of them knowing against whom they were called, until they entered the Court Room; and the evidence given in the one room could not be heard in the next. Those who were not arrested, as they could not know who were to be the witnesses against a particular individual, or what individual was to be tried, could not well collude together.⁶

I quote these two passages at such length in order to give the reader the some idea of the “feeling” of the proceedings. The feeling of hysteria as conveyed in the four citations at the beginning of the chapter is exemplary of the mood of the South with regard to slavery in the early-to-mid nineteenth century.

There was significant early-to-mid nineteenth century congressional activity concerning slavery. Ever since 1787 Constitutional Convention’s electoral provision counting each slave as three-fifths of a man⁷ the ever-increasing territory of the United States went through geopolitical shift and reorganizations. Until 1860, the predominance of slaves in the South afforded the Southern States an electoral overrepresentation in Congress and on the Supreme Court. Many of the Manifest Destiny territory gains

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⁷James M. McPherson, Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction (New York: Knopf, 1982), p. 2
(e.g. the Louisiana Purchase) were made under Southern presidents elected by Southern constituents. There was a tacit understanding that the right to regulate slavery was strictly reserved by the states.

In 1820, the Missouri Compromise admitted Missouri as a slave state, but prohibited slavery North of 36 degrees 30 minutes latitude. The congressional debates sparked by this compromise revolved principally around the role of Federal government in the regulation of slavery. Was the Federal government to have a major or a minor role in the regulation of slavery? Most Southerners adamantly reserved the right of the states to regulate the institution; and, gripped by a fear of slave insurrection, maintained strict legislative and judicial measures to control such things as freed black emigration to and from the Southern states.

At the time of the Vesey conspiracy, 1822, the Missouri compromise and the Federal regulation of slavery was still a hotly debated issue, perhaps made hotter by the apparent lack of accurate communication between Washington and the South. Frequent miscommunication and a lack of sophisticated communications systems fed the fire of many rumors of slave insurrection which circulated about the South. In 1822, Sen. Rufus King of New York denounced slavery in the U.S. Senate. News of the senator’s denunciation of slavery traveled throughout the South, and was cumulatively altered and speculatively changed rumor. This rumor apparently spread like brushfire, for the alleged Vesey conspirators were motivated to “mediatate murder” (as quoted New York Newspaper.) because they thought that congress had “made them free,” and that the Charleston legislature refused to enact this congressional decree. The Vesey conspiracy was one such event that was shrouded in secrecy. There was a great deal

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8 McPherson, p. 2
9 ibid.
of controversy over the alleged conspiracy, particularly the extent of its credibility. Some questioned the validity of the Court proceedings, and wished to verify whether or not there was an alleged conspiracy at all. One such person, Supreme Court Associate Justice and Charlestonian William Johnson, doubted the "extensiveness of the plot" and "...warned against mass hysteria."¹⁰ Johnson wrote an anonymous editorial to the Charleston Courier soon after the Vesey trials. He illustrate his skepticism with this anecdote I quote at length:

The following anecdote may be relied on as a simple narrative of facts, which actually occurred within the recollection of thousands. In the year 1810 or 1811, [Georgia and South Carolina] were thrown into great alarm by a letter transmitted from [the governor of North Carolina] to [the governor of Georgia], and then [to the governor of South Carolina]. The sufferings of the inhabitants, particularly the females, from apprehensions painfully excited, induced a gentleman of this city, then a resident near Augusta to call on the Governor, ... and request a sight of the letter. At the first glance of the eye he pronounced it a hoax: for it bore the date of the 1st of April. And had been picked up in one of the country towns in North Carolina, where it had in fact been dropped by some thoughtless schoolboys. On the face of it also it bore such evidence of its origin, as must have struck any observer whose vision was not distorted by alarm. For it was dated Augusta, signed "Your loving brother Captain Jack." But it was in vain that these suggestions were made. The Governor of Georgia could not brook the mortifying discovery of his having been duped, and the whole country, on the designated night was ... agitated...

....The trumpeter of the Augusta Cavalry resided in the opposite district of Edgefield, and orders had been issued to him to attend the company that night. By some accident these orders did not reach him. ...[H]e halted at Moore's mills, on Chever's creek, in South Carolina. Here he and a companion were shown into a garrett, where they [got drunk], when the continual passing and repassing of the mounted militia drew their attention. ...[T]he half-intoxicated bugleman resolved to try the effect of a blast of his music upon the fears of a party just gone by. The effect was electrical.

...[T]he detachments galloped in all directions in search of the offender, and returned with a poor half-witted negro. It was in vain that he denied it: he was first whipped severely to extort a confession, and then, with his eyes bound,

¹⁰Starobin, p. 67.
commanded to prepare for instant death from a sabre, which a horseman was in the act of sharpening beside him. He now recollected that a man named Billy, ... had one of those long tubes which boatmen use on our rivers, and declared that he sounded the horn

...An armed force was immediately detached to the house of Billy, and there found him quietly sleeping in the midst of a large family, and in a degree of comfort very unusual for a slave—for Billy was a blacksmith, a fellow of uncommon worth, and indulged in such privileges by his master as his fidelity justly merited. [I]n one corner of his house, ...the horn was actually found covered and even filled with cobwebs, they condemned the man to die the next day!—and, what will scarcely be believed, they actually received evidence of his having been once charged with stealing a pig, to substantiate the charge[.]

...The owner of one of the worthiest men in all that country, thunderstruck at the sentence, entreated a more deliberate hearing; but not being listened to ...pressed the injustice and precipitation of the sentence, ...but in vain. The presiding magistrate actually conceived his dignity attacked[.]

...Billy was hung amidst crowds of execrating spectators;—and such appeared to be the popular demand for a victim, that it is not certain a pardon could have saved him.11

I quote this anecdote at such length, again to fully indulge and impress upon the reader the hysteria of the times. An alleged April Fool’s joke resulted in the hanging of a valuable slave. Furthermore, the irony of similarity between this anecdote and the Vesey trial could not be more apparent. A valuable tradesman is put to death by public fear of the threat slaves posed to freed Southerners. Denmark Vesey, a freed, skilled carpenter was put to death for ostensibly similar reasons. Though Billy was accused of blowing a horn he could not possibly have blown, Vesey perhaps blew his own ideological horn too loudly for the Southern ear. Indeed, the coercion of evidence in this anecdotal case casts reasonable doubt upon the credibility of the evidence presented in the Vesey trial, virtually all of which was entirely circumstantial. Nonetheless, circumstantial or not, several thousand slaves and free blacks were hung

by virtue of public suspicion. As it was virtually impossible to verify the credibility of allegation in these cases, lynched bodies are the only tangible detritus, material evidence of innuendo, rumor, allegation and/or real plot. The Vesey conspiracy, though probably 'real,' is full of such ambiguity. I should also note that this conspiracy bears no unique significance to the further history of Charleston that we consider here. I am not trying to make a unique teleological link between this conspiracy, opposed to any other. Rather the conspiracy and trial anecdotally and allegorically (if we consider it an allegory of other such conspiracies and trials) illustrate the fear of insurrection, as well as perhaps the desire for insurrection, as it occurred in Charleston, the site of our inquiry, and allegorically exhibit the stereotype.

2.1.1 The Stereotype

During the time of the Vesey conspiracy, congress and the states established geographic zones of permissible corporeal ownership. Rapidly shifting electoral demographics prompted the slave-heavy South to acquire more territory to keep pace with the population growth in the North.¹² Such demographic shifts determined the electoral significance of the “three-fifths” clause in the Constitution in each election year. However, by this time, Southern political hegemony began to wane. These legislative and geopolitical movements reflected strategies of containment; of slavery, by the Federal government, and of freedom, on the part of the South. The quantity contained, moreover, was race. Furthermore, such legal maneuverings of containment in the South could hardly quell the psycho-trauma brought on not only by the fear of insurrec-

¹²McPherson, p. 52.
surrection, but by the quantity of race itself. This quantity, apparently psychological, I refer to as the stereotype.

The silent black majority of Charleston in 1822, almost exactly a century prior to the publishing of *Porgy*, were highly visible, and unsound. Unsound to the white classes of Charleston who, in endless reams of supremacist didacticism, negotiated their relationship with this potentially subversive mass. The extraction of truth in the trial of Denmark Vesey was as much a punitive bout with the enigma of the black populace, as it was an enactment of the ritual of jurisprudence. The repetition of this ambivalence, whether in the form of hostility or didacticism, was exhibited in the many trials within the trial (the Trial of Rolla, the Trial of Peter, the Trial of Jesse, the Trial of Denmark Vesey, the Trial of Monday, the Trial of Gullah Jack, the Trial of Harry, the Trial of Mingo, the Trial of Jack, the Trial of Smart, the Trial of Bacchus) through the executions of each of the conspirators (save two whose sentences were commuted to lifetime banishment from the United States).

The stereotype requires, for its successful signification, a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes. The process by which the metaphoric ‘masking’ is inscribed on a lack which much then be concealed gives the stereotype both its fixity and its phantasmatic quality—the same old stories of the Negro’s animality, the Coolie’s inscrutability or the stupidity of the Irish must be told (compulsively) again and afresh, and a differently gratifying and terrifying each time.

Moreover, the fear of insurrection exceeded each hung body, and the temporary sat-

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13"And the black population of more than 50 percent made the city much smaller when considered for the purposes of ... theatrical audiences. Charleston may not have had more than the capacity of the Broad Street Theatre”. Severens, P. 47.

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isfaction of execution was undoubtedly tempered with the frustration of an ever persistent fear which did not go along with the deceased, to be finally contained.

What is this stereotype? What is this beast that plagued the minds of so many Southerners? The stereotype is both excessively individual (i.e. an individual may radically personify a stereotype) and individually excessive in the sense that it exceeds the individual. Homi Bhabha, perhaps the most illustrious poststructuralist, postcolonialist theoretician of the racial stereotype accounts for such colonialist hysteria with regard to the stereotype:

The stereotype ... is an 'impossible object'. For that very reason, the exertions of the 'official knowledges' of colonialism—pseudo-scientific, typological, legal administrative, eugenicist—are imbricated at the point of their production of meaning and power with the fantasy that dramatizes the impossible desire for a pure, undifferentiated origin [which may also be read an undifferentiated, or continuous history, my emphasis].

Bhabha instead insists upon the stereotype as a psychological quantity with only one relation: the colonizer. The relationship between colonizer and stereotype is one of intensely fetishistic desire. Thus, according to Bhabha, Southerner’s were not concerned with blacks per se, but rather their psychological manifestation in the stereo-

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15Homi Bhabha, “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism,” *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 81. Note: the ‘undifferentiated origin’ referred to here references the Lacanian formula of the Subject. In that formula, the subject is the effect of language. It is always already “split” in what Lacan calls the field of the Other, the Symbolic field of language. The subject unknowingly denies is implication in the field of the Other and insists instead upon its knowing, rational autonomy; insists, in other words, on an undifferentiated state of coherence, which is to say an originary state prior to language. Lacan of course maintains that there is no such state. This non-conscious split of the subject, also referred to as the scotoma, or the blind spot of the subject, is the differentiation that Bhabha claims colonial subject seeks to disavow. The Lacanian implications are obviously much beyond the scope of this paper, as they are surely barely comprehensible here. I include them, nonetheless, to clarify the reference of the phrase “undifferentiated origin” to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory.
type. Hence the allegorical similarity of so many slave conspiracies, and the affective allegorical charge between them. Hence the ambiguity over ‘real perpetrators’ versus the falsely accused. This peculiar marriage between the stereotype and the colonizer generated voluminous discussions and debate over what became formally known as The Question of slavery. The demon stereotype, as we have stressed, incited much hysteria whose movement, as we saw in the Justice Johnson’s anecdote, was like that of wildfire. Indeed, among blacks as well as among whites, the stereotype feverishly pervaded the imagination, whether in the form of the belief that the slaves had been set free by Congressional decree in 1822, or the fear that blacks would metaphorically take a match to gunpowder by sacking the Arsenal (Charleston’s armory) and with the arms occupy the rest of the city.

2.2 Antebellum Charleston

In the winter of 1825-26, “..a rash of incendiarism, blamed on blacks, swept through the city. Racial tension not only diverted funds from “progressive building projects;” it could lead also to the destruction of existing structures.” Charleston was rebuilt again, and by 1854 Charles Fraser, “Charleston’s preeminent antebellum chronicler” commented upon the appearance of the city stating: “whatever there is now [1854] of the modern appearance in our buildings, is chiefly owing to the desolating fires that have so often visited our city.” Fraser’s commentary came in 1854, during the period historically referred to as the antebellum, or pre-Civil War South.

\[^{16}\text{Severens, p. 65.}\]
\[^{17}\text{Ibid., p. 25.}\]
\[^{18}\text{Ibid., p. 65.}\]
The antebellum South was characterized by social opulence, by fear of slave insurrection, and dogged anti-Federalism. It is from this antebellum South that the seeds of the Confederacy grew.

In 1838, Charleston experienced another fire, and the following summer yellow fever. It seemed that Charleston was living up to its reputation as a ‘city of disasters’. In 1849, 13 inmates, slaves, escaped from the Charleston workhouse. Nearly all were caught the next day, tried, and hung. Those at large again caused hysteria among an increasingly white working-class Charleston. A mob had to be called off.

In the 1850’s, however, Charleston experienced the culmination of public health and economic improvements that had been made over prior decades. Lavish parties were held on the gentrified South side of the city.

In February [1851] Mrs. Charles Alton gave what may have been the most splendid ball the city ever knew. Approximately 200 guests used 18 dozen plates, 14 dozen knives, 28 dozen spoons, 6 dozen champagne glasses, and consumed 4 turkeys, 4 hams, 50 partridges, 12 pheasants, 22 ducks, 10 quarts of oysters, 4 pyramids of crystallized fruit and coconut, and ”immense quantities” of bonbons, cakes, creams, and jellies.

This incredible party typified Charleston’s ante-bellum “golden era,” before the Civil War, when the South, holding fast to slavery, indulged unsurpassed hedonism. Also in the 1850’s, Charleston’s white population increased, as did Northern anti-slavery

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19 Fraser, pp. 216-17.
20 ibid.
21 Fraser, pp. 227-28.
22 Note: This book recounts the history of Charleston from its founding to the present, so when the author qualifies this as the most splendid ball the city ever knew, he undoubtedly is referring to Charleston up until 1851, and in all probability the whole history of the city. Fraser, p. 231.
23 Fraser, p. 236.
rhetoric. The beginning of the crisis of the institution (slavery), it seemed, had befallen Charleston. Charleston’s law enforcement agencies stepped up public whippings and hangings of blacks and whites. In October 1859, John Brown led his infamous attack on a federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia. This raid touched off a predictable panic among Charleston’s whites who approved “extreme extralegal measures” of surveillance and punishment. “Northern abolitionists ... threatened the hegemony of the elite and a social order of deferential whites and servile blacks.”

Soon after John Brown’s raid [1860], South Carolina seceded from the Union.

On December 11, 1861, at the outset of the Civil War, Charleston experienced the most devastating fire in all its history.

2.3 Charleston in the 1920’s and 30’s

After the devastation of the fire of 1861, Union occupation and Civil War defeat, a number of natural disasters including a hurricane in 1911, Charleston regained an historic composure. Miss Susan Pringle Frost, a real-estate broker, was the founder of Charleston’s modern-day preservation movement. In April of 1920, she and a number of other Charlestonian social elites founded what was then known as the Charleston Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings, and what is now known as the Charleston Historic Preservation Society.

Also in the 1920’s, Charleston experienced a literary renaissance. Many works of
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literature yearned nostalgically for ‘a golden past’ which had been lost to Civil War defeat. Prior to the Civil War, Charleston had never known itself to be without slavery. Now, Charleston was never to have slavery again. This historic rupture inaugurated history itself in Charleston, as Charleston was to become “America’s most historic city.”

In the 1930’s, a series of essays entitled The Carolina Low Country yearned for the grace of the antebellum South, “...a harmonious and hierarchical society of pure, self-sacrificing women...brilliant cavalier...and grateful, docile slaves.” This nostalgia typified the literary and cultural resurgence of the 20’s and 30’s. In 1931, the Preservation Society secured a 24 square block area of Charleston as America’s first urban historic district. The first of its kind, the Zoning Ordinance was hailed by many as an advancement of urban and architectural planning. The Charleston Evening Post in an editorial of the ordinance commented, “[i]t is a very difficult thing to order satisfactorily the growth of an old city, ...[however, the City Council] ..has most happily disposed of much of this difficulty by following in the main the life lines of the community, recognizing established characteristics and instituting what might be almost called influences rather than regulations for the future to bring about a correction of departure from the true form of the community rather than to change it in any essential element.”

Now, preservationists could adopt district-wide architectural and building codes to restore buildings deemed historically significant. Several hundred homes and other built institutions were chosen and gradually restored throughout the rest of the cen-

28 Fraser.
29 Fraser, p. 372.
30 Stoney, p. 134.
tury. Among them, Cabbage Row, a grouping of speculative apartment properties at 89-91 Church St. Some of the homes on Cabbage Row have been dated as far back as the late eighteenth century. More recently, the buildings are known for and through their “simulacrum”: the setting of the 1925 novel *Porgy*.

### 2.4 *Porgy*

In 1925, nearly a century after the Vesey Conspiracy, Dubose Heyward wrote the celebrated novel *Porgy*, the story of an old, black beggar who lived on “Catfish Row” off of Charleston’s Church St. In 1935, George and Ira Gershwin adapted the story as the opera *Porgy and Bess*. As we have seen, the setting of the novel has been regarded as a “simulacrum” of the site at 89-91 Church St. In the novel, Catfish Row, actually an enclosed courtyard, was an enclave of poor blacks. Although right around the corner from Meeting St., Charleston’s main thoroughfare, Catfish Row was an ethereal world of fiction, the make-believe place of the novel, a world apart from the city proper. It was also, in literature reviews, championed as the *authentic* setting of the *authentic* Southern Negro. During the Harlem Renaissance, several New York Times book reviews praising the novel claimed that “...the author has penetrated rather deeply into some of the recesses of the negro consciousness...” and that the “novel [deals] felicitously with the indolent, casual, swarming life of the negro quarter of a Southern city, [and] lifts its subjects to the level of art and yields

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31 “Cabbage Row is typically a tenement according to the usage of the time when it was built, a commercial venture on the part of an individual who might never have lived it itself.” Stoney, p. 27.

All of the negroes in the novel achieve this status of vivid authenticity, the epic charisma of their tragic lot. The novel’s villain, Crown, is dauntingly virile, as potently “bestial” as an animal. “He was a stevadore, had the body of a gladiator, and a bad name.” Among the many women he ensnares and discards is Bess, a whore and “happy dus[t]” junkie. During a period of Crown’s absence, Bess falls in love with Porgy, and temporarily alleviates her ‘life of sin’. However, on a church retreat on one of the islands off the Charleston peninsula, Crown finds Bess and tries to coerce her to stay with him, instead of returning on the boat. Later, amid a horrible tempest, Crown returns to win Bess back from Porgy the benevolent, happy-go-lucky crippled beggar, and favorite of the local whites. Thinking of Porgy as hardly a man, and certainly no match for him, Crown unwittingly meets his death at the hands of Porgy. Death having captured Crown left no one between Porgy and Bess; and, elated at the prospect of ‘his Bess’, Porgy is finally crushed when he finds that Bess has gone to “Noo Yo’k” with Sporting Life, the crafty gambler and drug dealer that had unfortunately crept his way back into Bess’ life.

I am struck by two observations concerning the novel’s historical occurrence, and the story of the novel itself. With regard to the novel itself, Porgy is undoubtedly a beautifully tragic love story between Porgy and Bess, its main protagonists. Nonetheless, the allegorical similarity between its antagonist, Crown, and Denmark Vesey is apparent. The allegorical relationship between Crown and Vesey, furthermore, invites skepticism of the judicial monopoly of fact, truth and reality; and scrutiny of the distinction between fact and fiction, between Vesey and Crown. A capital offender is

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35 ibid., p. 17.
tinged with the fictional unreality of a murderous villain, and vice versa; a fictional character's similarity to Vesey, or rather, men like Vesey, makes him all the more 'real'.

While the 'high-art' realism of the fictional characters' authenticity is a trope of fiction, their accurate similarity to the 'real Southern Negro' was apparent to many readers. This authenticity prompts me to wonder if and how the authenticity of blacks—an intensely corporeal, actual quality of the body and lived experience—is really about the body or the experience of that body, or whether this authenticity is an excess of the body, an excess of fact and fiction, a phantasmatic quality that achieves it greatest 'realism' through elusion. I am thinking precisely of the stereotype, and of its theoretically oppositional relation to the 'real' experience of blacks. Denmark Vesey was, I will venture to say, all too 'real' to whites and blacks—as were Crown, Porgy and the rest of the characters—to the readers of Porgy and the audiences of Porgy and Bess. To what extent is the privileged knowledge-experience of blacks 'real' in the sense that it is strictly outside of and opposed to what are considered hegemonic, racist discourses of the stereotype, that "fake," notorious character (assault), and highly fetishistic "white" impression of the "black"?

The black per se, that black who is overlooked by the racist hegemony of the stereotype, has been referred to in historical discourse as "the pleb". "The 'pleb' as she or he was embodied in workers, students, immigrants, all those made poor, sorry, worthless, or marginal by the society in place, was conceived as endowed with 'the immediacy of knowledge ... which springs from the realities of suffering and resistance'."

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Foucault is assuredly convinced that the “pleb” does not exist, but that there is “plebness”\(^\text{37}\). The contemporary ‘African American’ is undoubtedly a “pleb” in this Dewsian sense in so far as it opposes the stereotype-as-racist-reduction. Foucault denies the “pleb,” he nonetheless insists that there is “plebness,” a seemingly elusive, abstract quality. If so, if there is this “plebness,” where throughout Charleston’s contemporary restoration, does it reside? Is it the same as authenticity?, or is authenticity a stereotypical quantity?

The allegorical relation of the novel to slavery is also significant because of slavery’s abolition in 1865. Prior to the fire of 1861, and the abolition of slavery in 1865, Charleston had never known a time without slavery. As of 1865, Charleston was never to know slavery again. The allegorical representation of _Porgy_, in addition to being stereotypical, indicates a displacement of the representation of slavery, from _fact_ (as in the court transcripts of Vesey trial) to one of allegorical fiction.

The significance of this development in light of the nostalgia and historicizing foundations of the 1920’s indicates that the allegorical representation is related to the nostalgic mourning of a lost era. Especially in terms of the image of the city of Charleston, the fire of 1861, in conjunction with the abolition of slavery, _killed_ something, made a taboo of the institution, and prompted its displaced, allegorical representation within a highly picturesque, utopian, nostalgic, historic imaginary.

In the following chapters, we will examine the structure of allegorical desire, which is to say, we will account for the nostalgia engendered by the structure of the allegory. For this, we will use Joel Fineman’s model of the allegory as put forth in his work “The Structure of Allegorical Desire.” We will also introduce the simulacrum, in

order to transpose this nostalgia, and this structure of the allegory from the realm of
literature, to the visuality of the restored city of Charleston.
Chapter 3

Vertigo

San Franciscan house in Alfred Hitchcock’s Vertigo.

What is a simulacrum? It is a false copy of an original. What is the difference between a false copy and a true copy? The difference between a true and a false copy is the difference between, for example, a legal dollar and a counterfeit. It is the difference between essence and appearance. A true copy is endowed with the essence of the original, whereas the simulacrum is endowed with a semblance that gives the effect of essence. More than that, the simulacrum altogether challenges the validity
difference between essence and appearance. A true copy is endowed with the essence of the original, whereas the simulacrum is endowed with a semblance that gives the effect of essence. More than that, the simulacrum altogether challenges the validity of ‘origin’ and ‘copy’. To clarify what the simulacrum is (because, as we shall see, it is a tricky concept to master) we now turn to Vertigo.

3.1 Vertigo

Filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock’s 1958 Universal Pictures film Vertigo visually and narratively exemplifies the simulacrum. Alfred Hitchcock’s’s film Vertigo stars James Stewart, Kim Novak and Barbara Bel Geddes. Protagonist John “Scotty” Ferguson (Scotty) is a retired private investigator who is hired to follow the wife (Novak) of an old friend. As Scotty follows Madeline Ester, he falls in love with her.

At the beginning of the film, we learn that Scotty is afraid of heights and has vertigo, hence the title. Each time he finds himself at a harrowing distance from the ground, he experiences vertigo, a neurotic hallucination of extreme height. Early in the film, Scotty is at the apartment of his college friend Mitch (Barbara Bel Geddes), an undergarment designer, when he climbs atop a short footstool in an effort to conquer his neurosis. Just as he is jubilant over a temporary lapse of fear, he catches a glimpse of the window and the street below. Vertigo. Shortly thereafter, Scotty embarks on his assignment to follow the wife of his friend, and is quickly intrigued by her apparent obsession with the portrait and life of a deceased San Francisco debutante, Carlotta Valdes. Based on the museum portrait, Madeline, the wife, artfully transforms herself into the image of the dead woman. Scotty, more and more intrigued, pulls Madeline
from the San Francisco Bay after a suicide attempt, and soon after falls in love with her.

On a country drive, they visit the Redwoods, and St. Juan Battista, an old Spanish mission that has been restored, in Scotty's words, "has been preserved ... exactly as it was one hundred years ago, as a museum..."

In the Redwoods, now quite literally a natural museum, an exhibit of the tree rings marks the radius of the tree at various historical events. The tree was so big at the Battle of Hastings, and so much bigger at during the American War for independence, and so much bigger during the Napoleonic Wars, etc.. Madeline traced her finger round and round over the spiral of rings encountering major historical events every time she crossed the imaginary line of history radiating outward from the center of the tree, and following the repetition induces a certain vertigo of historic relativity.

Did the tree grow outward from the beginning of time? Surely not. We begin to realize that the origin of the history inscribed on this tree (the center of the tree) is
an arbitrary point in time. The shape of time begins thus to conform to the trace of the rings, and the major historical events, once primary in terms of their linear trajectory, now obstruct and disrupt the infinitely expanding and diminishing circle of time. The spiral of history starts nowhere and ends nowhere. One might imagine that prior to the present tree, another tree occupied the same place, with a different origin, and so on... There can be an infinity of origins. Any conceivable event could mark an origin that itself exists as an arbitrary point on an arbitrary linear trajectory.

Throughout the rest of the film, the visible recurrence of spirals becomes more apparent. In the next few scenes, we see a spiraled lamp post on the lamp next to Scotty in Mitch’s apartment. Still later, the spiral of Madeline’s plunge to her death from the belltower of the St. Juan Battista mission church. Scotty, devastated by Madeline’s death, is plunged into a deep depression, which is broken after he meets a woman who bears a startling resemblance to Madeline. During their courtship, nostalgia and extreme melancholy tempt Scotty to recreate Judy in the image of Madeline. Scotty, despite Judy’s protestations, insists that she wear the same suit, shoes and hat that were worn by the original Madeline. Entranced with her beauty thus, Scotty nonethe-
less discovers an aberrant necklace. This necklace was for Judy, the beginning of the end.

Minutes after discovering the necklace, Scotty drives her back to the mission and forces her to climb the belltower to the original scene of the former “suicide.” He climbs with her, experiences vertigo once again, only to finally rid himself of fear when he realizes the solution to the mystery of the obsession of the former wife, her death, and his extreme melancholia.

Judy was both Judy and Madeline. Judy and Madeline both were and were not the same woman. At the solicitation of Gavin Ester, Madeline’s husband, “Judy” posed as Madeline in an elaborate plot to murder the real Madeline. Scotty, having saved “Madeline” from the San Francisco bay, knew she was in a depressed state. The day Madeline died, Scotty ran up the belltower after “her” in a desperate attempt to save “her” from what he dreaded. As it turned out, Gavin was waiting up in the belltower with his real wife whom he wanted dead. When “Madeline” reached the top, Gavin pushed the real Madeline out of the tower, and shielded “Madeline” (who was later to
Figure 3-4: Left. Madeline. Center. Carlotta Valdes, the dead San Francisco debutante. Right. Mitch and Mitch’s painting. These figures dramatize the stereotypic artifice of femininity. Mitch painted an adaptation of the portrait of the debutante with her face on it, dramatizing both her jealously over Scotty’s inattention and the artifice of femininity whereby even she could have been “the woman” that transgressed the individual women of the film.

be “Judy”) from view. There Madeline fell to her death, or so Scotty thought until he saw Judy wearing the necklace that his former love wore before she died. He realized then that Judy had been the semblance of the woman he had originally fallen in love with. Now, dressed in the identical suit that Madeline wore, she is, from Scotty’s vantage the definitive simulacrum (see–3-3). A false copy of an original. A false original because Madeline was and was not the woman Scotty fell in love with, and Judy was not really the imitation he determined to perfect. Judy, like the mission, is restored “exactly as ‘she’ was” (see Fig.–3-3) But exactly like whom is the question deserving of an answer.¹

Madeline?, or Carlotta Valdes? the woman in the museum portrait? ad infinitum. The “copied” woman is a simulacral phantasm of the “original” woman since the shell of the original woman is the same shell of the copy. What is effectively “the woman” recurs throughout the plot with the formal identity of a different person every time. The artifice of femininity is used to reconstruct “the woman” in every

¹Slavoj Žižek, in his book Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture has rehearsed a similar analysis of Vertigo, though not specific to the simulacrum.
instance. The artifice of femininity provides for Scotty the effect of authenticity of each individual woman. The collectivity of signifiers (e.g. suits, bras, necklaces, skirts, the undergarments (see 3-5), like those that Mitch designs,² effect (i.e. comprise) femininity.

Similarly, the practice of historic restoration, as in the restoration of the St. Juan Battista mission and Charleston, is the arrangement of artifice to achieve a desired effect of authenticity. The mission as well is now a phantasmatic replica of the previous ‘original’ mission. Historians must rely on bits and pieces of the ‘old’ to reconstruct its phantasmatic double.³ Charleston, like the mission, is a simulacrum, a false copy of an original. A New World settlement, its first buildings were undoubtedly

²Mitch’s tertiary presence in the plot, and the masculine ambiguity of her name are part of the formulation of abjectness which is suggestively ‘queer’. Also, and very importantly, she is the designer of this feminine artifice, of bras, girdles etc. The creator of this artifice has a familial rather than sexual relation to Scotty, suggesting that Scotty’s heterosexual desire cannot engage with the ironically deconstructive character of Mitch, the abject designer of feminine artifice, the person, in other words, whose practice is ostensibly tertiary to, and yet produces the authenticity of the women Steward so desires.

³Vertigo is undoubtedly one of Hitchcock’s most brilliant movies. While summarizing it, I am awestruck once again.
‘copies’, symbolic renditions of other buildings, in other times, in other places, in Older worlds. Since its “founding” and throughout its history, Charleston is a city that has endured natural disasters too numerous to mention. Charleston’s local history is pocked with arbitrary origins (i.e. an arbitrary origin would be the city as it existed prior to any given natural disaster after which it was “copied”); and to the extent that Charleston has endured natural disasters, the ‘origins’ were ‘models’ of the then rebuilt ‘copies’.

To reiterate, the simulacrum is a false copy. But more than that, the simulacrum defies the notion of copy and original. Recalling Vertigo, as an “original,” the simulacrum was a copy: Madeline, Scotty’s original lover copied herself in the likeness of the portrait of the debutante. Furthermore, as it turned out, the original Madeline was not an original at all, but an impersonation of another, murdered Madeline. As copy, Judy was doggedly reconstructed as the original Madeline. The original was yet a copy, the copy was the original. Likewise, Gilles Deleuze asserts in his work “Plato and the Simulacrum,” “...Plato, by dint of inquiring in the direction of the simulacrum, discovers in a flash of an instant as he leans over its abyss, that the simulacrum is not simply a false copy, but that it calls into question the very notions of the copy and of the model.”

The simulacrum implodes the distinction between copy and original. It is abysmal, as Deleuze has remarked. Moreover, this infinite recurrence of the simulacrum is suggestively allegorical. If we recall the vertigo of historical representation in Vertigo, the simulacrum was individually a mimetic simulation, a false copy. In conjunction with an “original” that “copy” implies (however false), the simulacrum appears as an abysmal mis en abyme, where, in the absence of any primacy of an original, a failure.

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of slippage ensues whereby the simulacral image, anchored to no original referent, recurs again and again.\(^5\)

To further broaden the scale of approach to the simulacrum, I will elaborate two new considerations which have been suggested thus far: allegory and nostalgia. Joel Fineman’s “The Structure of Allegorical Desire,” schematizes the nostalgia of allegory in terms of structuralist and poststructuralist linguistic models. Thus we shall consider allegory.

### 3.2 Allegory

In Joel Fineman’s book, *The Subjectivity Effect of Western Literature: The Return of Shakespear’s Will*, he accounts for the rhetorical structure of the allegory as derived from the work of linguist Roman Jakobson. Here, Fineman borrows from an example of a Russian folk tale from Jakobson to illustrate the structure of allegory.

Jakobson’s example is the girl in the Russian folk tale who comes to be symbolized by the willow under which she walks: ever after in the poem, girl and tree are metaphors, each of the other, by virtue of their metonymic intersection, just as the sequential movement of the poem is conditioned by their metaphoric equivalence. In classical rhetoric, we would call this a synecdoche [a form of metonymy]: the girl is represented by the tree or it by her, in that one daemonicallly possesses the other. In Jakobson’s terms, however, what we have is a metaphoric metonymy and a metonymic metaphor, and the result, not

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\(^5\)The Morton Salt girl is a *mis en abyme*: underneath her umbrella she totes a can of salt on which is printed the same picture of the same girl underneath the same umbrella toting a can of salt on which is printed the same picture of the same girl under the same umbrella toting a can of salt, etc... ad infinitum.
surprisingly, is allegory[.]\(^6\)

If we think of allegory as a ‘moralizing’ narrative, it makes sense that an initial morally pivotal comparison, established at the outset of the allegory, should recur again and again throughout the allegory. In fact, this “primal scene”\(^7\) establishes both the structure of the allegory as well as its content. As Fineman notes regarding *The Canterbury Tales* which begins with “…‘the piercing of March by April,’ …we have the code of the months, or, more precisely, the system of oppositions which makes up the code”. Not surprisingly, this same ‘system of oppositions’ “…wet and dry, up and down, sky and earth, male and female…”\(^8\) pervades and structures the rest of the poem.

Let us take metaphor and metonymy at face value, without necessarily clarifying their precise meaning within the text. What is of interest to us, apart from the meanings of metaphor and metonymy, is the structure of the allegory which seems to have two parts: a ‘primal scene,’ and a recurrence of originary structure. Within this ‘structure of recurrence’ is produced nostalgic desire. The simulacrum, like the allegory, is characterized by recurrence both in terms of its semblance and in terms of time. Furthermore, the recurrent reference to an ‘original’ with regard to the structure of both the simulacrum and the allegory, is explicitly nostalgic.

\(^6\)Fineman, p. 10
\(^7\)Fineman., p. 12.
\(^8\)Fineman, pp. 12-13.
CHAPTER 3. VERTIGO

3.2.1 Nostalgia

We turn once again to Fineman and the structure of allegory.

How then, if neither philistine realism nor naive structuralism—what we have been taught sternly to call “mere formalism”—is adequate, might we account for the “longing” of the *Cantebury Tales*? If the piercing of March by April is the primal structural scene to which the text repeatedly recurs, how does that first image with its astrological, calendaric eroticism, control the structural unfolding of so massive and perfected an allegory as *The Cantebury Tales*...?

How does the longing get into allegory? If we remember the example of *The Cantebury Tales*, the poem begins with an opposition that is repeated in various guises throughout the poem. These oppositions refer back to the original, and while we may begin to infer nostalgia from this backward reference, this reference does not itself evoke nostalgia. Again, what happens at the beginning of the poem? The ‘piercing of April by March’ is an initial structural opposition. Furthermore, this initial opposition is configured only through the difference of the subsequent opposition. In other words, we do not know in what sense March and April are meant to be together until they are configured, or ‘revalued’ as Fineman says. Now, with a poem like *The Cantebury Tales*, we may or may not already know, at the outset, the relationship between March and April. March and April are already very evocative of ‘wet and dry, fecund and sterile’ etc. Nevertheless, the poem could have established any subsequent relationship between March and April.

The nostalgia, moreover, is generated from this *revaluation* of the opposition. The oppositional pair immediately following the original revalues the primal opposition of the original. If all of the subsequent oppositions *appear* related to the first, they
are not really. The meaning of the first opposition only signifies through its relative difference from the second pair, which is to say, its revaluation by the second pair. All of the subsequent oppositions are not related to the first opposition, but are related to its revaluation. They are related to something that 'looks like' the original, but which can be neither the original itself, nor the first subsequent opposition itself (since neither opposition can signify its 'sense' without the other). We might say that the second opposition nullifies or kills the pure nonsense of the first, "[a]nd it is precisely this occultation of the original ... now structurally unspeakable [(indeed as it was then) since] revalued as something else entirely"\(^9\) that appears as the ghostly, nostalgic double of the original, “a palpably absent origin by virtue of the structurality that it fathers.”\(^10\)

The same principle applies to the structural opposition between the phonemes /pa/ and /ma/. The first utterance of /pa/, purely diacritical as Fineman says, is revalued by the utterance /ma/. We cannot conceive of the meaning /pa/ outside of a linguistic chain of difference wherein the subsequent utterance of /ma/ allows the phoneme /pa/ to signify at all. Since the signification of each phoneme is relative to the other, the utterance of the second ‘kills’ the pure nonsense of the first, and leaves us with in essence, the ghostly phantom of its structure with every subsequent utterance of /pa/, /pa/ /pa/ /pa/......

The nostalgia is thus a yearning for an undifferentiated original. The ‘original,’ whether a poetic, metaphoric pair of oppositions, or whether the phoneme /pa/ is authentic in so far as it is elusive. We encounter the original when, without the utter-

\(^9\)Fineman, p. 17
\(^10\)ibid.
 ance of another sign\textsuperscript{11}, it cannot signify as anything to us at all. The original revalued through difference by another sign is no longer purely, singularly originary. Nostalgia, then, is the desire that laments this differentiation, this conception through difference. Nostalgia derives from the fetishism of essence, the belief in the pure, unselfconscious coherence of individual things, and from the denial of the necessary conception of meaning through difference. Authenticity, on the other hand, is the quality of an undifferentiated essence. Through repetition, such as the repetition of Hitchcock’s “woman,” or the repetition of Charleston (i.e. its numerous restorations) initiates a nostalgic impulse, we hope to encounter a pure, undifferentiated state. However, this undifferentiated state is always elusive. Thus nostalgia, as Susan Stewart says, is “the desire that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition.”\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11}I refer here to Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralist, linguistic sign. According to Saussure, the sign is a word-concept. It is made up of the signifier and the signified. The signified is an abstract concept, whereas its signifier is the material vehicle (e.g. the written word “tree,” or the graphic picture of a tree) of the signified. Saussure maintains that the signified is inconceivable without its signifier. Furthermore, the only way a sign may signify (which is to say “give off” its meaning) is through its relative difference from other signs. For example, a cat is a cat because it is not a dog. “Cat” could not signify without the difference of other signs. It is to this difference that I refer here.

\textsuperscript{12}Susan Stewart, \textit{On Longing}, as quoted in Jonathan Frow
Chapter 4

Black and White Simulacra

4.1 The Allegorical Representation of Slavery

In twentieth-century Charleston, the representation of slavery was markedly allegorical. Whereas the Vesey judicial proceeding and pro-slavery ideology rigorously assumed the status of fact, and contemporary pro-slavery ideology assumed the status of scientific rigor; *Porgy* on the other hand, was make believe. The story took place in an imaginary “golden age”:

Porgy lived in a Golden Age. Not the Golden Age of a remote and legendary past; nor yet the chimerical era treasured by every man past middle life, that never existed except in the heart of youth; but an age when men, not yet old, were boys in an ancient, beautiful city that time had forgotten before it
This golden age is firmly outside of history. On the other hand, this golden age is allegorically layered, simultaneously referring beyond time, before time, and to Charleston’s immediate past prior to the fire of 1861: “a city time had forgotten before it destroyed.”

The characters of the novel, as we have seen, bear an allegorical similarity to those of the Vesey conspiracy. However, without the notariety of fact, they merely allude to those conspirators, and others like them. Again, we may ask the question, “was Porgy real?,” which is to say, looking backward from 1925, did Porgy have a ‘real’ antecedent? We may also ask, going further backwards in time, given the extreme secrecy of the trial “was Denmark Vesey real?”. Or did these men, like the women (indeed, “the woman”) of Vertigo all allude to their stereotypic excess; which, in the case of Vertigo was femininity, and in the case of Porgy/Vesey was blackness/race?

This stereotypic excess, this phantom body, intermittently occupied or vacant, is the representational, tourist body of the African-American in Charleston today. The infamy of blacks, and the persistent fear of incendiaryism indicate the significance of race with regard to the burning of Charleston in the fire of 1861, and the historicity

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1Heyward, p. 11.
2Note: I am not saying that the African-American body is literally absent, though in many cases it is. I am saying that, in the cases where it is present, like the many basket weaving black women who are a popular tourist attraction, their racial and gendered iconography allude to and represent a nostalgic desire for the “docile” servant of ante-bellum Charleston—the era of restoration. Note also that I am drawing a comparison between the functioning of the stereotype in Vertigo, and the function of the stereotype in Charleston’s history. I am not suggesting that there is a reductive, analogical relationship between racial and gendered stereotypes. The visible operation of gendered and racial stereotypes differ in a number of ways that I will not elaborate here. Nonetheless, I wish to note that I draw this comparison only at the surface; which is to say the operation of the feminine throughout history in Vertigo, provides a broad conceptual metaphor for the operation of race on a similar historical trajectory. Femininity is thus an arbitrary stereotype with which to compare.
of Charleston today. Both fire and the infamy of blacks were the trauma of historic Charleston's "primal scene."

4.1.1 Race and Allegoric Trauma

The burning of the city was an allegoric trauma similarly to that which Fineman discusses with regard to the phonemes /pa/ and /ma/. Prior to its burning, from the perspective of contemporary preservationists, Charleston existed in a utopian pre-symbolic. In other words, the city did not symbolically signify anything outside of itself. It was a city in a "golden era." It was not, in other words, historic in the sense that the entire city alludes, as it does now, to itself in another time. Like Stewart, his dead lover represented for him, during his melancholia, a time of blissful innocence lost. His desire to "reconstruct" his new girlfriend to look exactly as the old one did is the same motivating desire of the preservationists to restore Charleston. Charleston's fire, like Madeline's death, was the trauma that effectively historicized the remaining and later rebuilt city.

The tertiary, and at the same time significant notariety of blacks in the fire of 1861 suggests that blacks occupy a symbolic, or rather "symbolicizing" position, and that race, much like the phoneme /ma/ revalues the utopian pre-symbolic of Charleston to one of an historically symbolic city (symbolic because the city's architectural restoration symbolizes; which is to say, it refers simultaneously to itself and its past). Charleston fancies itself as that utopian pre-symbolic. This fantasy of undifferentiated origin is furthermore mediated by, or caught in the field of the stereotype. We see the "original

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3I realize that this Lacanian notion of the symbolic/pre-symbolic has been rigorously critiqued. I am not using this notion literally, uncritically. Rather, I am using it as a conceptual metaphor.
CHAPTER 4. BLACK AND WHITE SIMULACRA

scene" of Cabbage Row (or is it "Catfish Row's"?) only through the parallax view of the opera *Porgy and Bess*, through the racial, picturesque symbol of dilapidated architecture. This parallax image necessarily assures us that blackness, in Charleston’s primal scene both *murders in so far as it constitutes* (Charleston can never through preservation really exist as pre-Civil War Charleston) and *constitutes in so far as it murders* the utopian pre-symbolic of antebellum Charleston. The degree to which Charleston is murderously displaced from its pre-symbolic is also the degree to which the representation of slavery/black history becomes allegorical, invisible, and make believe, as the city’s restoration, or rather its *repetition* tries to efface the murder (and no less the murderer) of its past utopianism.

4.1.2 Black and White Charleston: Historic Simulacra

The novel *Porgy* took place in two worlds: the proper world of Charleston per se, and a tragic, heterotopian Negro enclave of oblivion to whiteness...

Now, gradually the noise shrunk, seeming to withdraw into itself. All knew what it meant. A white man had entered. The protective curtain of silence which the negro draws about his life when the Caucasian intrudes hung almost tangibly in the air.\(^4\)

...at once everywhere (throughout the story) and nowhere in Charleston (see Fig.–4-1).

Upon visiting Charleston today, one inevitably drives down Meeting St., and notices a stark architectural transformation from 375 Meeting St. onward heading toward

\(^4\)Heyward, p. 57.
CHAPTER 4. BLACK AND WHITE SIMULACRA

Figure 4-1: An early photo of a typical Charleston alley c. the turn of the twentieth century.

Figure 4-2: The “old, new” Charleston: a predominantly black neighborhood before the visitors center. Left. Chipped paint on a house (left-side of photo) exemplifies the lack of restoration.
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Figure 4-3: The “new, old” Charleston: a predominantly white historic district. Meeting St., various views.

the historic district. The buildings before the visitor’s center are dilapidated and in overall disrepair. From 375 Meeting St. onward, the buildings are meticulously restored (see Fig.-4-2). In addition to the architectural contrast is a racial one. The neighborhood on the periphery of the historic district, just above the Visitors’ Center on the peninsula is predictably black, whereas the historic district is decidedly white.

These two areas are historic simulacra of each other. Again, we experience the vertigo of origin. Which area models the other? Which is the origin, which is the copy? The black area represents the “old, new” Charleston. It is old, as is apparent from the wear and tear on the buildings. It is “new” because it has not been nostalgically restored in the likeness of the Old South (see Fig.-4-2). By contrast, the historic district is the “new, old” Charleston. As its restoration implies, it has been newly refurbished to look like the old. Thus, the historical, allegorical displacement of race is reified spatially in the city’s urban form (see Figs.-4-2, 4-3).
Figure 4-4: Top Row. Scenes from Porgy and Bess, the “original scene” as referred to in the tourist literature. Bottom Row, right. The restored Cabbage Row. Bottom Row, left. Dark archway corresponds to gated archway in the photograph depicting “Porgy.” Bottom Row, left.
a traumatic rupture. ‘Origin’ appears as a free-floating signifier, thereby inconclusively suggesting that the restoration could refer to the scene of 1925 when “Porgy” lived, or, since the entirety of the restoration project refers principally to antebellum Charleston, the origin ostensibly refers to that “golden age of a city that time forgot before it was destroyed.” The parallax image of the stage settings further distinguishes the historic authenticity of this site; which is to say, it engages the fantasy of this site’s undifferentiated origin, the elimination of time; and represses the tragic, traumatic initiation of history. The gap of elapsed history is displaced into fiction and outside whiteness vis à vis the picturesque decay of the settings of Porgy and Bess. Although we know that this site is an historic restoration, an interpretive rendition of a former, imagined place, we wish that it nonetheless embodies the jouissance of what it “must have been” in a “golden era.”

With regard to the nostalgic motivation of Charleston’s restoration, Susan Stewart writes:

[N]ostalgia is “the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition.” ...A “sadness without an object,” nostalgia “is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a fact that turns toward the future-past, a past which has only ideological reality. ..."6

The parallax allusion to the stage settings of Porgy and Bess effectively verify the historic authenticity of not just this place, Catfish Row, but of the entirety of the

5Heyward, p. 11.
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historic district which, without this nostalgic distinction (between history and fable), indeed without the "old, new," black simulacrum at its outskirts, would arguably be as faux as a stage setting. Moreover, when I drove down Meeting St. toward the historic district, I got the uncanny feeling of going from "backstage" (from the dilapidated "double" of black Charleston), to the "frontstage" restored Charleston. Indeed, the irony of the architectural distinction "Catfish Row," as written literally on the building (see-4-4), makes it seem as if the final restoration was based upon the novel, as opposed to the implication that the novel was based upon the place that is now restored.

As such, this black occultation of Cabbage Row—the fleeting parallax image—of the settings of Porgy and Bess, perfectly exemplifies the fantasy of undifferentiated origin as engendered by the stereotype. We see the origin, the utopian past, only through the "simulacrum" of Porgy and Bess. The opera settings are an architectural stereotype, a stereotypic metaphor of the past occupants of Cabbage Row. The viewer thus "turns about the pivot of the stereotype" only to identify once more with the fantasy of utopian, white origin.

7Bhabha, p. 75.
Chapter 5

Epilogue: The Search for the Hanging Tree

Madeline in the redwoods.

What I have tried to do with this thesis project is to illustrate the significance of race with respect to the architectural visuality of historic restoration in Charleston. I have tried to show first of all, that there is a relationship between race and architectural
visuality. I wanted to do this because I was becoming increasingly bothered and intrigued by what I viewed as a vacuum of identity politics with regard to the image of the city. There seemed, in my courses, to be two distinct spheres of urban theory discourse: socio-economic and/or socio-political discourse, and spatial architectural and visual theory of urban form. Aside from the physical determinism of Oscar Newman’s *defensible space*, there seemed to me to be no overlap between these two spheres. Furthermore, issues of race, as they are popularly called, seemed topically and thematically confined to the former sphere.

While evolutionist and multiculturalist ideologies are diametrically opposed (e.g. the former is racist, in so far as it advocates Western European racial hegemony, and the later is anti-racist in so far as it challenges this racial hegemony) both assume as their premise the biological and cultural naturalism of race. Neither explore the cultural production of its biologism. Rather both seek polemically to assure the situation of race in culture, thereby assuming its distinction from culture. In other words, for both evolutionism and multiculturalism, culture issues from race, but race does not issue from culture. Hence the situation of racial discourse almost exclusively outside of the realm of the spatially abstract (e.g. that which is assumed to be outside culture), or the image of the city, and within the realm of sociology. Hence the assumption that any relation between race/ethnicity and space involves only the cultural specificity of the external arrangement of space.

### 5.0.4 The “Real” Black History of Charleston

I would be intellectually negligent, nonetheless, if I did not note that the racial boundaries of the historic district did not constitute urban, *de facto* architectural and
historical segregation within Charleston’s restoration schema. Where is Charleston’s critical reflection upon the institution of slavery? Certainly not in the restoration of the Slave Mart Museum, or even the allusion to *Porgy and Bess*. Despite the convention of multiculturalism, Charleston’s tourist discourse does not offer self-conscious, self-indicting reflections upon the institution. It is painfully apparent, if you go to Charlestonians, while hardly advocating slavery, still revere the romantic stereotype of the docile black. What does it mean then, when the racial conservatism of Charleston’s tourist discourse nonetheless utilizes the conventions of racial sensitivity (as prescribed by modern day multiculturalist movements) while black Charleston appears to remains in unrestored disrepair? What does it mean when two arguable ideological descendants of nineteenth-century colonialist paradigms of race, American racial conservatism and multiculturalism, are schematized together architecturally such that African Americans nonetheless reside on the margin?

I have attempted, through post-structuralist investigations of the stereotype and the simulacrum, to talk about race in a different way, one that questions the essentialism of identity as inscribed on the body, and indeed, one that questions the naturalism of its historic, subjective agency. In other words, I wished to challenge through my investigation of the visual interrelationship between architecture and race, the essentialist historic subjective agency of race as put forth both by, for example, the nineteenth-century world’s fairs and much of late twentieth century multiculturalist ideology. But what of this stark racial marginalization that occurs in Charleston? What about the unique history of the actual African-Americans living there?

One of the criticisms of post-structuralist investigations of race, and “critical theory” in general is of its perceived neo-conservatism, its ineffectuality with regard to “the real world” and “real issues,” and what is regarded as its reductive axiom “the world
is socially constructed." The pitfall of the uncritical use of critical theory as an explanatory apparatus is a reverse-essentialism whereby race, gender, and/or ethnicity, whereas once considered purely biological, become exclusively cultural, discursive, linguistic. Rather than the advocacy of one side of the ... “race issues from culture, culture issues from race” must be a recognition of their inconceivably complex symbiotic relationship, as well as what I regard as simple profundity; namely, the real within the fake, and the presence within absence.

I have remarked, as has Susan Sontag that, at the center of such utopian gestures Charleston’s historic restoration, there is a lack beyond which there is the oblivion of a death. At the center of Charleston’s history, and the imminent presence of its architectural heritage, there is an absence that its restoration vigorously denies; namely, its past is dead and forever gone, like the burning of Atlanta. Paradise lost. Conversely, at the heart of the African-American absence, a presence began to take shape. There is no doubt that a large part of Charleston’s “black history” has been lost, burned, and is irretreivable. There is also no doubt that much of its history, while perhaps still around, is obscure and unsolicited. However, before we justifiably chronicle this history, let us pause for a moment, before the simulacrum. Whereas contemporary discourses of public space lament the loss of origin inflicted by the simulacrum, perhaps the image (as opposed to the ‘real that is behind it’), the signifier (as opposed to the signified), the stereotype is a fruitful site of inquiry, a potential location of culture, of history, of authenticity that is eluded by repetition or reification (i.e. historic restoration). While the loss of history in the case of black Charleston is certainly lamentable, it is equally negligent not to consider the potential of its ‘conspicuous absence’ and the mimetic subversiveness stereotype. It is, after all, the stereotype and simulacrum that, upon upsetting the notion of origin, force us to confront the painful realization that we may neither conceive of a white without
black, nor a black without white. Furthermore, it is this and only this realization that
historic restoration (either Charleston's, or a hypothetical, parallel black Charleston)
dishonestly seeks to deny.

5.0.5 The Search for the Hanging Tree

When I asked people, black and white, where this tree was, none knew. I was first
directed to the battery. “Which tree is it?,” I asked my traveling companion Juli.
“I don’t know,” she replied. We were both struck with the absurdity of trying to
find the one tree, among all of these trees, that once bore a “strange fruit.” Any
one of these trees could have been the tree. Or all of them could have been the
tree. I was then directed to a fork in the middle of Ashley Ave. When I arrived at
the fork there was a tree there, obviously too young to have been a contemporary
of (or to have supported for that matter) hanging slaves. In light of this quest in
search of the holy grail of a representation of slave history, I realized that I had found
something significant in terms of its absence, an ironic absence indeed. The absence
circumvents the frustrating inauthenticity of its repetition, of its restoration, that
nostalgia mourns. When we are given some form of a representation, our historic
imaginary is thereby restricted. When we are given some form of representation, is
its seldom as “real” as we had imagined. Indeed, how do you architecturally represent
slavery, or localize a monument to an institution that undoubtedly covered every inch
of ground in Charleston? When I was looking for this tree, searching and searching
for this tree, it was as if my frustration, more than a century later, was a pale parallel
of the horror of the ghosts of those running in the opposite direction trying to evade
the tree, to escape the institution.
Bibliography


