

What's a *Million Dollars* to Michael Jackson?

Authentic Culture and Commerical Tourism

J. Martin Taylor

Welcome aboard Celebrity Slavery, departing the Gold Coast and making short stops at Bahia, Port Au Prince, and Havana before reaching our final destination of Savannah.

—George Wolfe, "The Colored Museum"

Over the past several years, I have taken a kind of tour of African slavery. I have traveled to Ghana, Trinidad, and the American South, and the major attraction that brought me to these places was the way each locale deals with the history of slavery. To be sure, this might seem a rather gruesome way to spend one's vacations. But for many, visiting the sights of slavery becomes a celebration not of a degrading institution but of endurance and continuity with a distant set of homelands.

In April 1995, I encountered a newspaper article titled "Ghana's Grim and Bitter Landmarks." The report was specifically about the

restoration of old European forts along Ghana's coast, those great stone edifices in which the European mercantile powers hoarded their captured Africans before shipping them out to a life of chattel slavery. What does it mean to restore such sites, I wondered? What did the article's subtitle—"Blacks Angered over Slave Dungeon Restoration"—imply?

The author reported that the controversy over Ghana's castles boiled down to economic issues. For African Americans, these spaces are sacred spaces from the past, the last point of contact with the old ways of life and the launching pad for social and economic upheaval and cultural transformation. They represent what our lives have come to be over the past 300-plus years. But for Ghanaians, the castles stand for economic opportunity. Their land is rich in many resources but still suffers from the legacy of colonial exploitation and underdevelopment.

The castles represent the chance to make money, to give people from Europe and America a reason to view Ghana as a tourist destination. Slavery means little to the average Ghanaian; what Ghanaians do see quite clearly is the vast economic disparity between the United States and West Africa. If African Americans come because the space is sacred, fine, so long as we spend some hard currency while we are at it.

Several months prior to my reading the article, an African-American student group had asked me to moderate a discussion of "selling out" among African Americans. Although I had known that term for years, I had never really thought carefully about it. The consensus of the discussion group was that "selling out" consisted of turning one's back on social and spiritual connections with African Americans in order to achieve financial gain or social standing among whites. The opposite of "selling out" is "keeping it real." The terms represent binary poles of inauthenticity and authenticity, social constructs of weighty significance in contemporary African-American culture. The students insisted on two examples of African-American sellouts: Michael Jackson and Colin Powell. I have to confess that I was less interested in the complex reasons by which the students condemned each man than I was in the term itself. The idea that blackness—its history, culture(s), and spiritual connection—can be bought and sold fascinated me. Racial identity behaves like a kind of commodity. It has value. It can be coveted. It can be quantified, though perhaps not in the same way by each individual. Yet it is a commodity that—at least in my students' eyes—clearly needs to be conserved; it is a sacred item, the sale of which can bring ostracism from the group.

Indeed, when we employ the term "Black Culture," we often use it with the implication that—whatever that culture might be in its specifics—it is something that belongs to African-American people. It is not simply a set of learned behaviors, social relationships, and practices in which anyone can participate. It is a legacy handed down through generations. This particular vision of African-American culture finds its aesthetic statement in something like Langston Hughes's poem "Note on the Commercial Theater." "You've taken my blues and gone," laments Hughes's speaker,² the impresarios of the culture industry having transformed the sacralization of black pain into a money-making Broadway proposition. It finds its intellectual statement in the efforts of critics and activists to "reclaim the past," suggesting that history is not simply a set of abstractions but an object that can be possessed, a quasi-physical artifact that has a legitimate set of owners.

Of course, given the history of chattel slavery, black identity quite obviously has a deep and vexed relationship with commodification. If one can be bought and sold on the basis of one's skin color, if blackness is the outward mark of being property rather than being an autonomous human subject, then our entire thinking about race (at least in terms of black and white) in the United States has to be inextricably bound up with commerce. In a nation that so values trade, commerce, and capitalism, how well can we redefine the relationship between race, culture, and property even after emancipation and the civil rights movement? After all, the effects of racism are not simply a denigration of African-American self-esteem; rather, a very strong case can be made that the major effect of racism is economic subjugation. In an attempt to find out what some of this meant, I

went to Ghana. One of the places I visited in Accra was the W.E.B. DuBois Center for Pan-African Culture. His home in Accra is now a museum that houses DuBois memorabilia, lecture rooms, a guest house, and space for local students to study. It was an inspiring exhibit. I took my photos and carefully scanned the museum and talked about how, in DuBois's birthplace in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, I had never been able to find a single indication that he had ever lived there.

As I re-entered the main hall of the DuBois house, however, my reveries of spiritual connection were broken. A young Ghanaian man, a student who happened to be studying in one of the quiet areas of the house, stopped me and asked me what I was doing there, why I had come to visit the DuBois Centre. I explained my interest in and admiration of DuBois. "Why," he demanded to know, "is a white man interested in DuBois?" Even as we stood under DuBois's ever-so-light-skinned portrait, the young man would not hear of my blackness. He was angry at Ghana's colonial exploitation by Britain and economic subjugation by the United States; he desired a pan-African political and economic upheaval that could shake off Western imperialism in its various forms, which is why he was at the DuBois Centre. Yet clearly there was no room for me in his category of pan-African. The young man was passionate and articulate, and he had no use for me—either because he thought I was lying about my African-American background or, if he did believe me, I apparently did not possess blackness in the requisite quantity. Perhaps if I had been dressed as he was—Rastafarians cap, Chicago Bulls tank top (Number 23, of course), baggy jeans, medallion of Africa around the neck, nothing traditionally Ghanaian as far as I could see—I might have been more acceptable. Some of his arguments about Africa and pan-Africanism were quite sound, but I could not ignore the particular ways in which he

wanted to signify this to the world. The wardrobe, imported from the Western hemisphere, was a collection of commodities that symbolized blackness for him. His approximation of hip-hop culture was at least as important as trying to engage in any meaningful dialogue with me. Unfortunately, I think he had confused symbols with history and political engagement; like some of his contemporaries in the United States, who believe that black identity lies in the wearing of kente cloth, this man had found his most potent pan-African connection in the marketplace. If Michael Jordan has become the icon of everything from oppression to success to political motivation, we really need to reevaluate our racial paradigms.

From Accra I went to Kumasi, the capital of Ghana's Asante country. There I went to the Ghana National Culture Centre, where at the Tourist Board I met a student by the name of Korantin, who was assigned to be my guide. The Culture Centre itself would be familiar to almost any American who has done any amount of historical or cultural tourism domestically. In essence, it sets up in a small, self-contained space a kind of faux-authentic ethnic village in which people practice the various traditional, regional crafts. We walked through the demonstration areas that showcase the talents of metalsmiths, carpenters, cocoa farmers, drum makers, weavers, dyers, potters, and cooks. All their products, of course, are available for sale and export. In addition, there is a small museum of Asante culture and history on the grounds. For the casual tourist, this is one-stop shopping at its best.

I, however, had signed on for the grand tour, so Korantin and I proceeded toward Bonwire, about 25 kilometers outside Kumasi. Bonwire itself is a traditional village specializing in the weaving of kente cloth—though with the emergence of tourism, I am no longer sure exactly what "traditional"

means. Kente cloth itself is to be worn solely by Asante nobility, each design having a specific meaning and often a ritual use. We kente-wearing Westerners, however, have reduced that meaning to "Africa": a generalized and amorphous geography. What does Asante history or custom mean to most of us? What more do the colors and patterns mean to us than "black pride" in its vaguest sense? Yes, the cloth is beautiful, even inspirational, yet it has largely become a commodity to be traded. We can buy our African past for a price, but we may not be sure what that past specifically means. Besides, how do I know if my ancestors were not of some African nation that were rivals of the Asante? For Ghanaians, however, these implications seem to be of little consequence;

arriving in Bonwire I was surrounded by at least a half dozen boys competing to sell their cloth. On the way to Bonwire, we stopped in several villages, each specializing in its own traditional craft. The artisans are authentic, and these products can certainly be put into normal use by Ghanaians, but for me they are mostly souvenirs approaching a kind of Afro-kitsch. The sellers did not stress the practical or political applications of these things; rather, they were offered as little pieces of the Other, price negotiable, which I could take home to show my friends.

My experience in Kumasi had further complicated the relationship of commerce and culture for me, and I had yet to see the slave castle I had come to Ghana to research. As I checked out of the hotel in Kumasi, the reservations manager, a man in his thirties, chanced to ask me about my business in

Ghana. He was curious mainly because I had faxed a request for reservations from New Hampshire the week prior to my departure for Africa. Apparently, it was rather rare to have American guests there. There were several other employees within earshot as I explained my project to him: What are the economics and politics of turning slave castles into tourist attractions? To whom do these structures "belong"? Who has the right to determine the specifics of their use? I had explained my project to other Ghanaians, but I had never elicited a response like the one I got now. Almost before my explanation was finished, a short gentleman in his fifties emerged from around the corner to chime in. "Black Americans," he said. "We don't like them."

If I had not become so used to being a "white man" at this point, I might have been offended. Yet it was clear that the small group who gathered around to give their opinions did not recognize any blackness in me. Perhaps it was unfair of me. Perhaps they assumed that I, as a "white man," would naturally share their views, but I decided not to try to complicate their racial notions. I allowed them to continue on in their explanation of the relationship between Africans and African Americans; I kept their reality rather than mine. One might even say I exploited a differing sense of authenticity. The older man launched into his version of the history of slavery. Those who were sent into slavery, he claimed, were either "the weak," if they had been captured in war, or the outcasts and dregs of African society: the thieves, the rapists, and the murderers. Moreover, he ar-

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gued that those enslaved went willingly because "they wanted to forget their past." African Americans, his logic ran, had purposefully forgotten Africa because it was the site of their shame as individuals. He disdained any African-American concerns about the restoration of the slave castles along the coast. For him—and this was the consensus of the group—these restorations were solely about attracting more hard currency to Ghana, whether it be dollars, euros, or yen. "Tell [black Americans] to stay out of it," he admonished me at least three times during his explanation. He scoffed at the idea that the sites of slavery could have any noncommercial meaning for African Americans, let alone any connotation approaching the sacred. After all, the people sold into slavery had—by his reasoning—rejected Africa and their past of their own accord. Any interest now was too little, too late. The more he spoke, the more circular his logic became; African Americans were to be despised because they had forgotten Africa long ago, and they were to be despised because they were the outcasts of African societies who, in his mind, enslaved themselves in order to forget their shame. No one wanted to correct his point of view. At least for this small group, there was no path back to Africa that could be gained through history or cultural memory.

The woman who ran the hotel jumped into the conversation at this point. "Black Americans," she echoed her colleague. "I don't like them at all."

"Why not?" I asked.

"They don't send enough money," she replied curtly.

The other people standing in the group all voiced their agreement.

Apparently we descendants of outcasts and rejects can only buy our way back into the good graces of our ancestral homelands. Though this woman's daughter had studied pharmacy at Weaton College in Boston, she

could not manage any empathy for what the African-American position of the castles might be. "We are dying, and what do they do?" she demanded. Most Americans of any color cannot fathom the depths of African poverty, even in a relatively prosperous country like Ghana. Most Americans have trouble envisioning how things we take for granted are luxuries in the developing world; probably most Americans have never even thought about it. To view Africa primarily as the mythic motherland is to reduce its significance. It is to ignore the depths of meaning that reside on that vast continent. To see Africa only in terms of its admittedly glorious—and largely ignored—past is to dismiss all its complexity, to reduce it to a manageable symbol that can be invoked in easy political sound bites.

Yet the Ghanaians gathered around me in the hotel shared a similar sort of misprision. They have their own sets of unhelpful myths about the United States and African Americans.

"What's a million dollars to Michael Jackson?" The older man asked.

To be sure.

The hotel staff once again showed their agreement with his assertion. But to choose Michael Jackson as a synecdoche for black America certainly strikes Americans, regardless of race, I would wager, as problematic at best. Whatever the cultural roots of his music and styles of dance, Jackson's surgical whitening over the years has left African America, at best, ambivalent about his blackness. Yes, the great majority of African Americans are better off financially than the average Ghanaian, but we are hardly the celebrities—Eddie Murphy, Whitney Houston, Michael Jordan, and Michael Jackson—who Ghanaians associate with African-American life. These are the black Americans Ghanaians can reach out and touch, in some sense, because they are represented by their CDs and videos and jerseys. That is, they are

available in commodity form in the local marketplace. One wonders how these attitudes and myths will change should, say, gangsta rap ever become widely popular in West Africa. Ironically, socially aware hip-hop could do much to make Ghanaians aware of things like poverty, racism, and despair that many black Americans face every day. Yet the paradox is that the star performers themselves could obscure any truths found in the music. "What's a million dollars to Snoopy Dogg?" is not any less a problematic question.

The United Nations has designated the slave castles at Cape Coast and Elmina as "World Historical Landmarks." That is, they are sites that profoundly affect and reflect world history; as such, they are also eligible for UN funding. Such a designation brings interest from other groups as well. The Ghanaian government finds in these castles both a newly exploitable resource, something to change for Western monies, as well as—though this is the minority view, as far as I can tell—an opportunity to educate the children of Ghana about the slave trade. The United States Agency for Economic Development sees not only the humanitarian aspect of investing in the preservation and restoration of the castles but also the potential political interest that can derive from what amounts to even very modest funding by American standards. The Smithsonian Institute sees not only opportunities for education and preservation but also a chance for its people involved in the project to exert a certain influence and control over the ideological content of the historical memory being preserved here. In a certain sense, the Smithsonian is reclaiming these sites, 4,000 miles from Washington, as part of African-American cultural property.

On approaching Cape Coast castle, one has all this to think about, but that gets over-

whelmed, at least initially, by the emotional gravity of the place.

I took a guided tour of Cape Coast castle and also wandered around on my own for quite some time. The tour itself begins with the viewing of a video that has as its opening premise a scene depicting an African village being called together to listen to its history. From there, the video presented a rather standard documentary-style overview of the African slave trade. The video ended by returning to the storytelling scene. Its intention was clearly a pan-Africanist one, stressing, for instance, the importance of extended family; it attempts to create a sense of community between those people who were gathered in the room to view it. Whatever reports I had read back in America, whatever resentment I had encountered in Kumasi, the program at Cape Coast has clearly been designed with African-American concerns and tastes in mind. It was consciously accommodating.

The same can be said for the museum in Cape Coast Castle. Indeed, one clearly sees the stamp of the Smithsonian in this segment of the tour. From the way the exhibits and artifacts are laid out to the lettering on the display explanations, people from Washington have obviously had the guiding hand in this process. In terms of content, the museum represented the history of slavery as one might learn its outlines in any number of aware and informed American high schools and colleges. Indeed, it was forthright in its representation of slavery, favoring hard facts over various myths. It included nothing that I could object to either intellectually or emotionally. I had come looking for controversy, but was getting only accuracy. Over the museum hung a very large purple and yellow banner that read: "Crossroads of People, Crossroads of Trade." That was the title of the museum exhibit, and it referred specifically to a historical past, yet I could not help but think that it was perhaps even more accurate



Elmina Castle
Photo by Rima Vesely

in describing the current status of Ghana, the underlying theme of my trip, and the complexity of understanding identity in the modern world.

The renovations that I observed being done to the castle were largely superficial: the replacement of stucco falling off the underlying brick, the whitewashing of walls that must take a severe beating in the coastal weather, the repair of crumbling steps leading from one level of the castle to another. The physical aspects of the place really have nothing to do with its significance.

My tour of Elmina was perhaps even more moving and educational than that in Cape Coast. The guide took a great deal of care to explain the history of the place; he also wanted to make it quite clear to me that the work being done on Elmina is preservation rather than restoration. By that he meant that they are attempting to maintain the present state of the castle rather than going back to original materials and plans. The difference in approach, he maintained, was a simple matter of cash; to restore it is simply beyond the means of the people in charge of Elmina. Yet at Elmina one still finds the original iron bars on some of the holding cells for slaves. One still sees some of the ornate wrought iron detailing near the governor's quarters that the West India Company used to signify its power. The guide could not tell me whether this detailing, some of which is in poor repair, would be saved or not. Outside, however, the new five-star resort was nearing completion, and the gift shop, he assured us, would eventually be expanded and improved. Apparently there is a great deal more Afro-kitsch that needs to be displayed than they currently have room for.

Despite the growing commercialism of Elmina, it was also the first place in Ghana where someone recognized me as being of African descent. My tour group consisted of several Germans; a pair of white Americans;

two Ghanaians; and another black man who, it was apparent to me, was not African. This young man, it turns out, was Afro-British. What struck me was that he did not come out and ask me if I was African American. Rather, after the end of the tour, he simply walked over to say hello and talk about his impressions of his first trip to Africa. Our conversation was clearly born of a diasporian connection, yet we did not have to speak of race or color directly. We could talk history and slavery and politics and racial brotherhood in ways with which we were both familiar. Clearly, the Brit had not been able to find this same kind of discussion with his Ghanaian companions or other white tourists; he and I were united by a Euro-American sense of blackness that they neither understood nor particularly cared about. I recall my first trip to England and asking a black man for directions: I was so shocked that he spoke to me in a British accent—unreal to my limited imagination and experience—that I could not even remember where he had told me to go. It was quite an alienating experience. Now, here in Ghana, I was recognizing exactly how much more I have in common with the black British than the Ghanaians; our cultural languages, our heritages and histories and everyday lives are forged of similar materials, materials not really found in Ghana. If we had come to Ghana looking to recover a lost past, looking for pan-African and diasporic connections, in these grim historical monuments, how ironic that we find it not in those spaces but by talking to each other. As outsiders we can recover a common past. For us as black Westerners, these castles have equivalent significance and value; we can thoroughly communicate the importance of that to each other, but not to anyone else on the tour.

Perhaps the real root of the problem is that, across the diaspora, people are compelled to reduce their counterparts into a quickly understood and, as a consequence, readily com-

modifiable shorthand. "Africa" becomes kente cloth and yam fufu without any real understanding of the complexities of history. America becomes wealth and power and prosperity without a vision of social division and inequality. Across the diasporic divide, each vision becomes the object of the other's desire. The easiest method of connections becomes not only to buy into the other's vision but to attempt to purchase it outright. But doing so does not bring us closer together; it simply makes some folks richer than others.

In the May 1997 issue of *Harper's*, Jim Sleeper wrote that "we no longer know how to say that being an 'American' is important."³ He suggests that our myths of national, racial, and community identity are becoming less powerful and unifying, that we are sliding down the slippery, Balkanizing slope of identity politics. Yet, after my tour of slavery, I feel that I have a better—because more complex—sense of what "America" and blackness are. They are not and cannot be explained through a single phrase but are better represented by competing and even contradictory ideals. Because American and African-American identities are continuing to evolve, it is difficult to get a handle on what they "truly" or "authentically" are. As we continue to struggle over what constitute American values, we will continue to esteem our different historical figures, sites, and artifacts differently. When we get a fixed consensus definition of what it is to be African, Real, and American, we will have stopped progressing.

At this point on our history, Americans are still working through issues of possession and dispossession. When Americans go abroad to a place like Ghana, those same issues come into even sharper relief. We see how the mythos of the United States as Land of Plenty has more than domestic significance. We have exported it through our politi-

cal propaganda and popular culture, and folks around the world have found their own uses for it. Such a phenomenon makes questions like "Where do I belong?" and "What belongs to me?" all the more difficult.

Sleeper writes that the

myths [of African, African-American, and American identity] are losing their traction against the forces of the global market that employs the techniques of mass marketing to guarantee the liquidity of collective amnesia. The relentless logic of the market overwhelms not only the worst racist pretensions, white as well as black, but also the best American civic cultural traditions.⁴

Yet what I found in my journey is that, in fact, it is the mass marketing of nostalgia, of a memory that may or may not be real, that actually attracts people. We are engaging the market in an effort to help us preserve and maintain the past, and that past—which is always socially and ideologically constructed—can be reformed and reframed by consumer demand. It can be apotheosized, ignored, recast, or obliterated according to the desires and needs of various groups. The myths are not pitted against the market. They are part and parcel of it.

Slavery and its memorials occupy a particularly significant position within the market. It was the logic of emerging capitalism that produced and justified the slave trade as we have come to know it. The ironic, but somehow natural, conclusion to that historical horror story is that we now more than ever can literally purchase that past in an effort to overcome amnesia. A flyer on my desk advertises a ten-day "Winter in Ghana" package tour that largely replicates the trip I made in 1996. You do not have to take my word on what it was like to visit the sites of slavery; rather, you only have to have sufficient capi-

tal to plunk down to go see for yourself. You can agree or disagree with my conclusions; you can put your own observations out into the marketplace of ideas. Take the trip. "Buy" the culture. Put it to your own uses. Ultimately who or what is there to stop you?

Ghanaians seem to understand that the great American civic tradition is that of capitalism and commerce. They just have not developed their economy to the point where they can apply that tradition to the mythos of their own national and racial identities and rename it as something sacred. We do not need Disney to open a historical theme park. Not because that corporation would desecrate the sanctity of history, but because we have already got such places in America and around the world.

Notes

1. Stephen Buckley, "Ghana's Grim and Bitter Landmarks," *Valley News*, April 18, 1995, p. A1.
2. Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems* (New York: Vintage 1974), p. 190.
3. Jim Sleeper, "Toward an End of Blackness," *Harper's* (May 1997), p. 36.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 43.