1999

African American History at Colonial Williamsburg

Nicole Carroll
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

---

by

Nicole Carroll

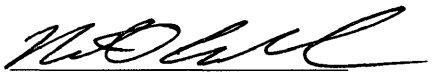
1999

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

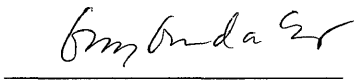
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

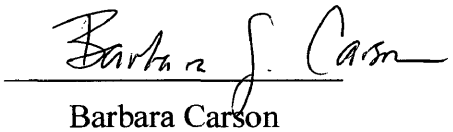


Nicole Carroll

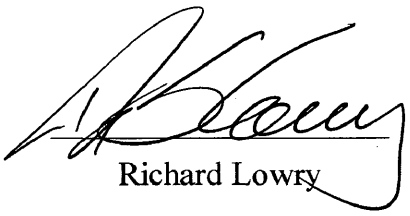
Approved, May 1999



Grey Gundaker



Barbara Carson



Richard Lowry

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
INTRODUCTION	2
CHAPTER I. MULTICULTURAL INCLUSION IN THE MUSEUM FIELD AND AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG	4
CHAPTER II. 1985 "BECOMING AMERICANS:" RE-INTERPRETATIONS AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG	15
CHAPTER III. CRITICISM, DISCUSSION, AND SUGGESTIONS	23
CHAPTER IV. SELECTIVE EXHIBITION PRACTICES AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG	33
CHAPTER V. THE LEGACY OF *SILENCES* BY TILLIE OLSEN	46
CHAPTER VI. SILENCES DURING RESEARCH	52
CONCLUSION	54
BIBLIOGRAPHY	56

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Grey Gundaker and Ywone Edwards Ingram for their inspiration, ideas, and encouragement. I would also like to thank Professor Barbara Carson and Professor Richard Lowry for their guidance and criticism. I would especially like to thank my parents, Richard and Marguerite Carroll; my sister, Rebecca Carroll; my brothers, Michael and Matthew Carroll; my grandparents Henry and Catherine Raum, and Elizabeth Carroll; my aunts, Catherine Nittoli, Sharon Raum, and Mary Voss; my uncle, Henry Raum; my cousins, Vanessa Nittoli, and William, Amber, Ashley, and Brian Raum. Thank you also to two very dedicated and caring friends, Jimmy Nappi and Charlotte Ryland. Peace and keep on thinking free...

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at selective omissions in museum presentation. It explores this topic at the reconstructed living history museum Colonial Williamsburg in Williamsburg, Virginia. The history of Colonial Williamsburg's incorporation of the African American past is assessed and discussed, taking into account other criticisms of Colonial Williamsburg.

While delving further into the African American interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg, the paper uses Tillie Olsen's 1978 book, *Silences,* which focuses on silences in women's literature. *Silences* helps to examine all of the intricacies of the silencings, things neglected or eliminated, in the African American presentation at Colonial Williamsburg.

SILENCES:

AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

INTRODUCTION

In 1978 Tillie Olsen's *Silences* examined the disruption of the creative process of a person who wishes to write but cannot because of certain circumstances which suppress the voice of the writer. These circumstances include race, class, and gender. Since that amazing book the concept of silence has reached all areas of scholarship, in particular feminist critiques of literature. According to Olsen, silences have taken many different forms in literature ranging from silences due to external censorship and outside pressures that lead to silence to internal textual silences on the part of the author.

This paper will explore silences in the curatorship of the reconstructed slave quarters at Carter's Grove plantation in Virginia, a public museum run by Colonial Williamsburg. Written, oral, and material evidence has been used by the curators at Carter's Grove to attempt to create a realistic picture of what the slave quarter's would have looked like in the past. Silences are at work in the exhibit through the ways in which curators decide what to show and what not to show. These silences can tell us about the moment we live in history because, as we will see, the ways we interpret the past reveal the world today.

Tillie Olsen's book *Silences* can help us understand the dynamics of "silences"- significant omissions - active in the slave quarter furnishings at

Carter's Grove and in representations of African American history at Colonial Williamsburg. Olsen originally called the talk she gave about silences "Death of the Creative Process" in 1962 (Olsen, 261). Her speech began, "Though I address myself only to the silences in literature and the ways in which writing ceases to be, this dying and death of capacity encompasses more than literature" (261). Thus, the idea of "silences" and a detailed exploration of silences in the works of several scholars can be used as an approach to the Carter's Grove slave quarter and other areas of Colonial Williamsburg. This approach can help increase our understanding of the intricacies and complexities of the politics and scholarship of historical interpretation and presentation.

CHAPTER I

MULTICULTURAL INCLUSION IN THE MUSEUM FIELD AND AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

Before we can understand silences we need to know the history of the inclusion of African American history at Colonial Williamsburg, other museums, and in historical scholarship in general. For the past two or three decades scholars have sought to include the voices of peoples whose history has previously been neglected and suppressed. This goal of multicultural inclusion has influenced the works of Americanists, American historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists in the university and in the museum field. The changing ideas and methods of these scholars have, in turn, had an impact upon the outdoor living history museum, Colonial Williamsburg.

Colonial Williamsburg aims to replicate Virginia's capital in the century before the Revolution, an ambition from which African Americans cannot be absent, given the large slave population of this tobacco producing area. At issue are the treatment of African Americans at Colonial Williamsburg, and the difficulty of representing slavery with sensitivity not only for the past, but also for the sensibilities of our era.

The 1960s started a revolution in African American history. Since then scholars' views of African American life have changed, shifting the study of

African Americans from the periphery to a more central position. Research has shown African Americans to be "catalysts for change since the republic's earliest days," not just "reactive victims of the American experiment" (Ruffins 1986, 506). Before 1965, historians doubted that there were enough primary sources to study African Americans, but since then scholars have mined libraries and archives to unearth new information and re-examine historical documents. Extensive fieldwork and oral histories have also been undertaken. Since the late 1980s, an increasing interest in archaeology at African American sites has led to the discovery of material evidence of African American life and therefore a richer knowledge of the past of people of African descent in America.

In the Museum Field

This upsurge in African American scholarship and the growing scholarship about America's various cultures in general, stimulated the incorporation of these cultures into museums. As Donald Garfield contends; "Judging from the publicity releases generated by United States museums, cultural diversity or multiculturalism is assuming a major position on institutional agendas" (1989, 43), an assessment confirmed by the American Association of Museums report "Museums for a New Century," which included a chapter on the multicultural diversification of audiences, staffs, and exhibits of American museums. "The report clearly indicated that diversity within the museums had not yet been achieved" although this was 1984 and "the report was a clarion call for change" (Ruffins 1986, 571). As Professor Michael Blakely of Howard

University states, "At the start, non-whites were entirely omitted from depictions of national heritage and identity. As time went on, Euro-Americans and non-whites appeared in separate or segregated contexts. Today, exhibits increasingly display all groups...within a common context of national history" (1990, 39).

According to Robert Sullivan, museums in the past "were used as public opportunities to instruct recent immigrant families in the protocols and civilities of proper behavior. Etiquette was a leveling and cultural centering control device in the chaotic multiculturalism of teeming America" (1994, 4). Museums provided knowledge of a 'common' cultural heritage. Now, museums, responding to the common criticism from scholars that they do not represent the diversity of American society, have incorporated racial and ethnic groups into their agenda. Ralph Appelbaum has pointed out that these new institutes "show the efforts of a contemporary, multi-ethnic society coming to terms with its complex roots and ever-changing cultural balances" (1993, 46). Thus recent years have seen the foundation of a "museum on the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, one on the Holocaust and, between 1950 and 1980, well over ninety African American museums" in the U.S. and Canada (Ruffins 1986, 557).

Issues of interpretation and representation are major concerns of every museum. Inevitably, they choose to portray certain aspects of the African American past while selectively rejecting others, thereby shaping the image of history. Fath Davis Ruffins takes this further stating, "All interpretations contain

some validity and some distortion; all have a social reality that makes them important in the present...Each form of preservation adds something meaningful to our understanding of the past (and possibly the present), yet these different modalities shape what and how we expect to learn from the past" (1986, 510). The issues important in America today are reflected in the relationship between museums and society. The selective interpretations at Colonial Williamsburg can help us better understand how multicultural concerns in contemporary society affect an institution and how one institution helps to shape society's attitudes.

At Colonial Williamsburg

Silence has been almost a structural theme at Colonial Williamsburg since its early beginnings. From its inception in the 1930s until the late 1970s, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation rarely mentioned the fact that over fifty percent of the city's population during the Colonial and Revolutionary periods was enslaved African Americans (Ellis 1990, 1). "Blacks, Indians, women, Scots, Germans, and Irish were ethnic groups...left out of the colonial American story" (Ellis 1989, ix). Given the continued legality of segregation and racism throughout the South at that time, this is scarcely surprising. In most of the early publications concerning Colonial Williamsburg, African Americans are not mentioned. For example in December 1951, President Kenneth Chorley wrote a report on the first 25 years of Colonial Williamsburg, with no mention of African Americans. Also, the first edition of the *Official Guidebook,* printed in 1951, which contains lengthy detail of the Historic Area and its houses, does not

discuss any African Americans. Only with the end of de jure segregation did the de facto segregation of Williamburg's history start to unravel.

"New Social History" at Colonial Williamsburg

Colonial Williamsburg did not escape the ferment of historiographical change in the 1960s and 1970s with the emergence of the "new social history." This approach sought to expand history from the confines of European American male political history and to examine the lives of ordinary people on a local level, including women and African Americans. African Americans came to be looked upon as being not merely economic assets, but an integral part of society. "The new story of the American Revolution was to be one of complicated social, political, and economic motivations and relationships, not simply a glorious triumph of democratic principles" (Handler etc. 1996, 569). Indeed, the new social historians pointed to the hypocrisy of the Revolution's talk of liberty for oppressed minorities such as African Americans.

Such historians extended their criticism to Colonial Williamsburg, accusing it of promoting a "sanitized silk pants patriotism" (Handler etc. 1993, 27). According to Richard Handler and Eric Gable, the museum's conservatism came from two main sources. The first was older employees who adhered to traditional nationalism, by training and inclination. The second was the business people (merchandisers, donors, and visitors) without whom Colonial Williamsburg could not have existed, and who saw the potential monetary value of patriotic interpretations of the past. Colonial Williamsburg curator Martha

Katz-Hyman, in a personal interview with the author in October 1996, explained that the "colonial revival" idea had a major effect on Colonial Williamsburg in its early years. She elaborated, the "1930s was a time of upheaval and change and looking to the past was comforting because of the war and depression...The buildings, the [Governor's] palace, and the capitol, were something that they could be proud of which reflected pride and patriotism." With the new social historians at work in Colonial Williamsburg, "during the late 1970's and early 1980's there was a realization that the past was idealized" and Colonial Williamsburg decided to refurnish as it really was (Katz-Hyman 1996). As Handler and Gable explain, "The new social history was meant to redress the balance and reclaim Colonial Williamsburg's market share. The museum would continue to celebrate American identity and American community, but it would no longer be silent about past injustices and their ramifications in the present" (Handler and Gable 1997, 4). These ideas are what Handler and Gable call "useful social history. The work of social history should be to connect the structural conditions...and cultural patterns...of the past to those of the present" (Handler and Gable 1997, 226).

African Americans at Colonial Williamsburg

Although African Americans had been on the staff at Colonial Williamsburg as non-professionals, it was not until June 1979 that Dennis O'Toole, Deputy Director of Museum Operations, and Shomer Zwelling, Research Historian, both advocates of the new social history, pressed for the

embodiment of African American history in the narrative at Colonial Williamsburg (Ellis 1986, 1). This resulted in a conference devoted to the subject held in the Spring of 1979, attended by various scholars of African American history such as Philip Morgan, a future fellow of the Institute of Early American History and Culture, and Edgar Toppin, a future member of the Board of Trustees (Birney 1988, 4).

The conference helped to secure Colonial Williamsburg Foundation funds for African American interpretation. Colonial Williamsburg began to include African Americans in their programs. During the summer of 1979, six African American college students were hired to portray slaves or free African Americans of Colonial Williamsburg (Ellis 1986, 1). Then in 1980 the "Black Music Program" was implemented and in 1981 an evening program called "African Traditions" started.

The "Other Half" Tour

"The Other Half Tour" by Rex Ellis also began in 1981 (Ellis 1986, 1). This tour was a combined effort which drew upon the research department, the company of colonial performers, interpretation education, and group visits (Butler 1981, 1,3). Ellis drew upon the themes of racial interaction, slave culture, and the contrast between plantation and urban life, areas of intense interest today (Ellis 1986, 1). In the past two decades racial interaction has become an established research topic among sociologists and anthropologists. Slave culture, including the continuities from African cultures, has also been the

subject of much discussion in history, anthropology, American studies, and archaeology. The differences between plantation and urban life for slaves have also been increasingly explored by historians, literary scholars, and other Americanists. Ellis focused on various themes in African American culture: religion, music, the slave work day, marriage and family life. He made particular use of the eighteenth-century slave narrative of Olaudah Equiano to inform his stories of slavery (Butler 1981, 1). Equiano's narrative is one of the many slave narratives that give valuable information about early African American life. For specific information about Williamsburg slaves, Ellis focused on Thad Tate's, *The Negro in 18th Century Williamsburg*, the main historical study of African American life in Williamsburg.

While witty, the title of "The Other Half Tour" is somewhat problematic since it splits Williamsburg in two and ignores the interplay between eighteenth-century African Americans and European Americans. Because Colonial Williamsburg has the ability to reflect and/or dispel prejudices against African Americans and separatism in today's society, this title may undercut the positive goals of the tour. As Edmund Gaither states,

> We must embrace a fresh understanding of the American experience. We must reject models of an American experience that express- directly or indirectly- a concept of either/or. We must not tolerate thinking in which folk are either African American or American. Lurking behind such concepts are constructs such as separatist/ integrationist, we/they, and ours/theirs (Gaither 1986, 57).

Anna Lawson has noted

> The 'other half' is a paradoxical term. On the one hand, halves are by definition equal; the term thus suggests that the Euro-American and African American stories are of equal value. At the same time, however, the African American half is 'other,' which at least implies some sort of inequality vis-a-vis the unmarked 'mainstream' category (Handler and Gable 1997, 79).

Ellis's "Other Half" tour was also the inspiration for several other African American programs, including 1984's "On Myne Own Time," 1986's "Behind Closed Doors" and "The Storyteller." Since 1984, many of these programs were to be used as school outreach programs (Ellis 1990, 19). These programs looked at different aspects of African American life, especially the complexity under slavery and like other Colonial Williamsburg programs, were based on historical research.

Research on the African American Past

However, interpretations of slave life are no easy matter, even with adequate source material. For example, in the November 1982 *Colonial Williamsburg Magazine*, Edward Chappell, Director of Architectural Research, pondered the difficulty of describing slave houses because of the diversity in accomodation, not to mention the uneven and biased contemporary evidence. To understand slave housing it was necessary to interpret the various publications describing housing, each of which had their own purpose, ranging from the outrage of abolitionists to the defensive paternalism of slave holders. The physical evidence provides an antidote to these prejudices, but even so is not free from the biases of our own times.

African American Archaeology as a Source of Information About the Past

The same problems arise in interpreting archaeological materials. Leland Ferguson states, "The evolution of African American archaeology demonstrates how our view of the past is affected by the world around us, even for so-called objective social scientists like archaeologists" (Ferguson 1992, xxxiv). He is commenting here on the fact that the archaeology of African American sites did not begin until the late 1960s after the Civil Rights Movement.

Since then, African American archaeology has been very important in the re-creation of colonial living conditions of slaves. This is demonstrated through William Kelso's work at Carter's Grove, a nearby Virginia plantation, acquired by Colonial Williamsburg in 1964 (Leone 1992a, 1083). In 1970, looking for the support buildings of the eighteenth-century plantation, Kelso found pits which he thought were tanning vats, but was unable to excavate fully because his funds ran out (Underhill 1988, 16). Next, Kelso began digging at nearby Kingsmill plantation where he again encountered the pits and discovered that they were inside the foundations of buildings. Underhill cites Kelso as writing, "These cellars were almost invariably found on documented slave quarter sites of later periods and they appear at every other 18th century probable slave site and at Kingsmill as well" (Underhill 1988, 16). These pits, known as root cellars, contain many items that may have been discarded or even hidden by the slaves themselves. Thus they offer valuable clues to daily life including information

about diet, tools, utensils for cooking, and even personal adornment. Today, the reconstructed slave quarters at Carter's Grove have become a major Colonial Williamsburg attraction. Thus slave site archaeology provided information for the reconstruction of the slave quarters at Carter's Grove.

CHAPTER II

1985 "BECOMING AMERICANS:" RE-INTERPRETATIONS AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

Christy Matthews, former director of the now reorganized African American Interpretation and Presentation Department (AAIP), has stated that in "1984 the AAIP was crawling but by 1990 the AAIP was walking" and by 1997 there were 14 people in the AAIP (Matthews, personal communication; October 1997). Based upon constant re-examination by peers, co-workers, and the public, Colonial Williamsburg historians have refined their interpretations of the past. That re-examination led to the 1985 publication of *Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg* and the adoption of the theme "Becoming Americans" (White 1994, 1). This theme's title is important because it suggests a variety of cultures subsumed under the 'American' mantle. The theme provides focus and consistency for varied storylines revolving around the particular conditions of everyday life, especially the interaction among diverse peoples. The program seeks to include "the lives of African Americans, Native Americans, women, poor and middling whites and various European cultural groups" (White 1994, 1). An example is the "Enslaving Virginia" storyline concerning African American slaves which was instituted in 1996.

Research

In July 1986, Peter A.G. Brown, Vice-President of Programs and Exhibitions, wrote a brief article on the research at Colonial Williamsburg. He stated that the institution was engaging in a great deal of continuing research on plantation life and the architecture of slave dwellings (July 1986, 1). Brown suggested for the African American history program,

> The opportunity to tell, demonstrate, and give life to the study of the black slave and the contributions blacks made to the economy and social structure of a tidewater plantation, this will be accomplished by the construction of slave dwellings, support structures, garden plots, yards, and an overseers house (Brown 1986, 2).

Later at Carter's Grove, African American volunteers and interpreters used building techniques as close as possible to the original techniques to reconstruct slave homes. Information regarding the construction methods came from archaeological and historical sources.

Given the huge amount background information needed for the new interpretive themes, research has been a continuing project at Colonial Williamsburg. In 1986 the AT&T Foundation awarded Colonial Williamsburg a grant of $400,000 to help expand its African American history programs. Through this grant, a senior scholar in African American history, Michael Nicholls, Associate History Professor at Utah State University, was hired to write a monograph on urban slavery in Virginia (Ellis 1990, 21).

Interpretation and Presentation

In 1987 and 1988, Colonial Williamsburg was still looking at the possibilities for the portrayal of African American life from different points of view. In November 1987 Betty Leviner, Curator of Exhibition Buildings, stated, "While the picture that emerges of what daily life held for an eighteenth-century Williamsburg inhabitant is admittedly geared toward the well to do, it is possible to include the city's black inhabitants as well since they were the individuals whose labor made these activities possible" (2). Dennis O'Toole, however, stressed the need for African Americans to be accepted in every aspect of the Historical Area. In the *Interpreter* of January 1988, he urged that "the story of Williamsburg's eighteenth-century black majority be one of the central threads" in the interpretation of the town (O'Toole 1988, 1). African American history continued to be pushed towards the mainstream.

During 1990, many activities took place at Colonial Williamsburg which centered on African American history. On May 4-5, African American author Alex Haley was a keynote speaker for a forum on colonial African American history (*Colonial Williamsburg Magazine*, 1990, 50). Also during the Spring of 1990, in *Colonial Williamsburg Magazine*, the scholarship of African American history is reported on in an article entitled, "Setting the Record Straight: African Americans and History," written by an African American trustee of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Edgar A. Toppin. In 1990, the dramatization entitled "The Runaway," was also introduced. It tells the story of a young plantation

slave who tries to escape trouble after accidentally shooting his overseer (Gill 1990, 25).

In 1991 The Multicultural Steering Committee of Colonial Williamsburg wrote a tentative plan called "Developing a Multicultural Interpretive Program at Colonial Williamsburg." Stressing the need for a holistic approach, the document pointed out that, "The African American history of eighteenth-century Williamsburg is not a new story line added to the objectives of the Historic Area. It is another way, a dynamic way, of telling visitors about our current interpretative themes" (1991, 3). For example, by examining the interactions between slave and master, visitors can get a better understanding of family life in Colonial Williamsburg. This use of the family is reminiscent of the way modern social historians seek to place their micro-histories within the greater scheme of things. The report of the Multicultural Committee program also stated: "we must clearly articulate how all of these individual sites connect in a coherent and substantial interpretive program" (1991, 4). It is not only intellectually and socially necessary to include African Americans at Colonial Williamsburg, but it also makes for a more enjoyable experience for the visitor. The story of African Americans is "dramatic and exciting" full of "action, tumult, and power...[and] can engage...visitors as never before in the experience that was life in the eighteenth-century Virginia and Williamsburg" (Multicultural Committee 1991, 2).

On June 29, 1992, Philip Morris Companies Incorporated awarded

Colonial Williamsburg a $100,000 grant to fund a two-part visitor and interpreter survey to assess African American interpretation at various sites and make changes to fill gaps in presentation (*Colonial Williamsburg News,* February 1993). From the grant by the Philip Morris Companies and a grant by the AT&T foundation, a group of visiting museum professionals assessed the African American historical interpretation. The Multicultural Steering Committee which organized the project reported in 1993 that the visitors suggested more African Americans be hired; that sensitivity training be provided for interpreters to make them more comfortable in discussing slave life and modern racial issues; and that more sites be developed to interpret African American history. Employees and visitors at Colonial Williamsburg were the next to survey the African American interpretation. The peer group would be invited back in 1995 to review again (*Colonial Williamsburg News*, February 1993). It would be beneficial for Colonial Williamsburg also to invite people from various groups to survey foreigners and the disabled.

Colonial Williamsburg historians also used re-enactments as a type of experimental research in order to better understand the lives of slaves. In the *Colonial Williamsburg Magazine* of Autumn 1993, Curtia James recounted her experiences at the slave quarters of Carter's Grove where she and her African American co-workers "gathered to re-enact the lives of 24 blacks who would give voice to their experience, rediscovering aspects of their day to day realities as much as our 20th century sensibilities could allow" (14). The re-enactment

went on for an afternoon, night, and morning. On October 10, 1994, Colonial Williamsburg held a mock slave auction on the steps of Wetherburn's Tavern. The scene depicted four African American slaves being sold from their masters and families in order to satisfy court ordered debt settlements (Clawson 1994-1995, 33). This caused great controversy within Colonial Williamsburg, the general public, and among academics. Christy Matthews, ex-director of the now dissolved African American Interpretation and Presentation Department argued that,

> Almost 15 years ago, there were some who weren't comfortable with incorporating the African American experience in our telling of the founding of this country. Five years ago, there was similar discomfort with the reconstruction of the slave quarters at Carters Grove. Today these stories and other African American presentations fascinate and enlighten all our visitors. The department is recognized throughout the country for its innovative approaches and assisting in the process of incorporating diverse histories into American education...We must take our next step (Coleman (Matthews) in Clawson 1994-5, 33).

Disputes over programs such as the slave auction at Colonial Williamsburg have been inevitable and productive obstacles.

By June 1995 the African American experience had been transformed from a minor aside to being "integral to the archaeology program" (Edwards, 19) Work included a fieldschool in African American archaeology and museum interpretation. African American sites have been excavated through the Learning Weeks in Archaeology program at the Colonial Williamsburg slave quarter and at

a fieldschool on 19th-century slave site on the Brush-Everard property in the historic area. African Americans have been increasingly central to Colonial Williamsburg's operation, employed as archaeologists, students, museum staff, and volunteers. "The most ardent volunteers were from a black genealogical society and interpreters from Colonial Williamsburg's Department of African American Interpretation and Presentation. Participation by the African American community was nurtured through lectures, site visits, an open house and a visitor program" (Edwards 1995, 19). African American archaeology has also been incorporated into the broader public education program. In March 1995 Colonial Williamsburg conducted a two-weekend program where the public learned about archaeology and cultural and racial diversity in colonial Virginia (Edwards 1995, 19).

One of the most important events involving African American history at Colonial Williamsburg took place on November 1-3, 1996 when Colonial Williamsburg hosted, "Interpreting the Early African-American Experience: More than Just Slavery." The conference examined challenges and opportunities of teaching and interpreting the early African American experience (*Colonial Williamsburg News*, September 1996, 2).

In 1998 Colonial Williamsburg proposed sectioning off the historic area into three enclaves that would be accessible only by ticket or The Good Neighbor passes available to local residents. This has spurred a controversy over whether it is right to fence off an area that has always been open to the public. The

educational scheme of "Becoming Americans" has also been reorganized by telling four daily stories. These changes reflect the reorganization of some of the departments of Colonial Williamsburg. In particular, the African American Interpretation and Presentation Department has been dissolved and mainstreamed into the various enclaves of the historic area. Christy Matthews, former Director of the African American Interpretation and Presentation is now the Director of Interpretive Programs and Operations for the Midtown area (Tolbert, 1a).

CHAPTER III

CRITICISM, DISCUSSION, AND SUGGESTIONS

Handler and Gable

It is important to consider not simply the steps taken by Colonial Williamsburg to include African American history but *how* they were taken. Colonial Williamsburg faces the conundrum of having to present an accurate picture of the past while catering to the demands and prejudices of its paying audience. Mark Leone believes, "some history museum interpretations project present-day social inequalities onto the past" (1986, 477). Richard Handler and Eric Gable claim that Colonial Williamsburg portrays itself to visitors as an authentic representation of the past, as evidenced in the smallest details of landscape, crafts, housing, and farms, and in the re-enactment of human lives. They argue that the focus on accuracy in representation is so obsessive that a visitor is led to forget the larger framework of interpretation and thus view the entire panorama of the Williamsburg restoration as an "objective" reflection of the past "as it really was." According to Handler and his collaborators, against this setting the interpretation of African American life comes to appear insubstantial, based on conjecture rather than documented history. The result is a

stunning contrast between an authoritative presentation of European American, mainstream history and a more speculative treatment of the African American experience. According to Handler and Gable, ironically, despite its admirable ambition to integrate the history it presents, Colonial Williamsburg has fashioned different modes of interpretation to convey the experiences of different groups: one way for African Americans, another for European Americans, but it is the latter that claims to be authoritative and objective. For this reason, African American history remains a side show; entertaining, informative, to be sure, but a side show nonetheless; to the major business of Colonial Williamsburg.

Critique of Handler and Gable

However, while Handler and Gable's critique is thought provoking, when looked at in a different light, it does not always hold up. In June 1993, Theresa Singleton, a member of the peer review group discussed earlier, wrote a review of the slave quarter at Carter's Grove. She described the interpreters as wearing period clothing, but talking in the third person. This costuming is a change from a previous review in September 1991 by Mark Leone who stated that the interpreters did not wear colonial slave attire (Leone 1992, 1083). This change marks a change in the presentation of slavery at Colonial Williamsburg as it has tried to remain flexible. Singleton said that interpreters described work routines, slave resistance, foodways, punishment, family, and the foreman. She also states, "A final interpreter's statement made about the black foreman's house is that the vast majority of Virginia's non-slave holding whites approximately eight-five

percent of the white population in the eighteenth century lived in quarters comparable to the African American foreman's house. This message makes the slave quarter immediately relevant to most visitors" (Singleton, 526). During my trip to Carter's Grove slave quarters, the same point was made quite clear throughout the quarters.

In my opinion, while there are similarities between the common European American and African American slave home quarters of the eighteenth century, and this interpretation helps create a relevance for European American audiences, it also downplays the often horrible living conditions of slaves. In turn, it makes it seem as if the lives of European Americans were identical with those of African Americans during the eighteenth century. It is also misleading to portray only these similar aspects of African American and European American culture while ignoring the special problems of slavery and the variety of experiences. Ironically, these presentations could encourage the erroneous belief that slaves led comfortable lives. An alternative approach would be for Colonial Williamsburg to explain that by twentieth-century standards, few people in the eighteenth century led comfortable lives and slaves suffered the most. Mark Leone learned at the slave quarter that although poor European Americans did live under similar conditions, as many as a hundred slaves may have lived in just one building the size of the same size as the Carter's Grove reconstruction (Leone 1992, 1083). A clarification such as this makes all the difference for a truly thought- provoking disclosure of slavery. As Colonial Williamsburg's

Multicultural Committee asserted, "interactions must honestly include the intimidation, exploitation, and violence attendant to the slavery system" (1991, 3).

This discussion leads back to Handler and Gable's claim that not only the details of interpretation differ between African Americans and European Americans at Colonial Williamsburg, but the whole treatment of their history. They believe that while European American history is presented as easily understood facts, African American history is presented as merely conjectural mainly because European American history is based on textual sources while African American history relies more on material and oral sources. However, this example of the visitors being told that most European Americans also lived in housing similar to the slave quarter alters the larger story that Colonial Williamsburg tells. If reconstructing the lives of slaves requires conjecture, that is equally so for the experiences of European Americans. Throughout the historic area visitors are constantly being told "we don't really know" and "if the Governor was to come back here today he probably wouldn't even recognize the palace." Clearly there are many aspects of the lives of European Americans that are also portrayed as conjectural throughout the historic area. Martha Katz-Hyman explains that curators use the "same process, [when furnishing buildings and areas] but there is more information on the Palace and Lord Botetourt than on the slave quarters" (Katz-Hyman; personal communication, October 1996).

Handler and Gable further elaborate on the conjectural interpretation of

African American history, "Ironically, then multiculturalism...and relativism work to shore up the legitimacy of mainstream history by making it seem more real and truthful than the history of other groups" (Handler etc. 1992, 791). To be fair, the history of slaves offers peculiar problems and depends on some different sources than European American history. At Colonial Williamsburg the fact that the story of slave owners is told in terms of specific individuals, and the history of everyone else is devised from statistics is not entirely the fault of Colonial Williamsburg. Though we may wish that visitors leave the various houses not "with a shadowy picture of the slaves" (what kinds of jobs they had, how many there were) and instead "provide a sense of what life was like for Williamsburg's other half," it is not always possible (Handler etc. 1992, 797).

The importance of Colonial Williamsburg's use of individual stories, though, should not be underestimated in the African American context. By presenting the African American interpreters as representative of all facets of African American life, Colonial Williamsburg makes is difficult for visitors to marginalize African Americans. African Americans should not be treated in a separate history of their own, but rather as integral members of the population who exerted an important influence on all European Americans in Colonial Williamsburg.

Handler and Gable argue that some of the different modes of interpretation used at Colonial Williamsburg to convey the African American and European American histories of Williamsburg hinder the goal of integrating the

story of Williamsburg. A lack of sources also means that interpreters of African American life rely more on genres such as storytelling, music, and historic dramatization than do interpreters of European American life. Though important, these genres may create in the minds of some "the impression that African American history is less real" (Handler etc.1992, 798) or at the very least, less factual. These genres may also reflect a racially slanted European American view of the strengths of African American society. The emphasis on art and music confirms the achievements of African Americans in a non-threatening role and a stereotypically emotive character. Furthermore, the temporary nature of these exhibits suggests a non-integral significance of African Americans to the national heritage.

This position of power over historical artifacts and interpretation is in itself inimical to the stated purpose of Colonial Williamsburg as a living history museum. Because African American interpreters often act out of historical character, they can give a context to the information they provide in terms of the archaeological and historical methods used. This sometimes provides little room for visitors' own interpretations of events. "The visitor is left with nothing to do but listen. Rather than encouraging further questioning, reflection, study, and investigation, Colonial Williamsburg forecloses these activities by attempting to provide visitors with all the answers," (Leone 1996, 479).

The interpreters offer one picture of the past, but visitors should be encouraged to discuss and create their own colonial picture from the information.

This was the policy followed by Rex Ellis as one of Colonial Williamsburg's first African American interpreters. By portraying a character and then stepping out of it to explain the significance of that characterization, visitors felt more involved in the process. "The entire experience became more educational" (Ellis 1990, 18). In this way, Colonial Williamsburg, does present history as contingent and as a matter of questions and interpretations not simply as facts. Thus Colonial Williamsburg seems more successful than Handler and Gable suggest, even according to their own criteria. Interpreters explain that exhibits change routinely in the light of new evidence. Because Colonial Williamsburg expects research to add evidence in the future, present exhibits are challenged, yet at the same time the tendency of the museum to present itself as real history implies a sense of authority which makes individual interpretation difficult. Handler explains,

> Colonial Williamsburg's educators...routinely use relatively trivial inauthenticities to bolster their audience's belief in the mimetic authenticity of the greater whole. That is, interpreters reveal the interpretive element of history with respect to petty details, but visitors are never encouraged to question the historical reality of 'Colonial Williamsburg' itself" (Handler etc. 1992, 796).

This tension can be resolved by acknowledging that this is the best interpretation scholars at Colonial Williamsburg, as authorities, can provide at this time, but doubtless new information and perspectives will lead to new interpretations in the future.

By making Colonial Williamsburg as comprehensive as possible, the

Foundation can try to make the past relevant to all visitors. By incorporating African Americans into the more traditional history, the museum "can help to place men in their common humanity" (Margaret Mead in Sullivan 1994, 13-14). One good way of effecting this would be to place more emphasis on African Americans in the Christian community of Colonial Williamsburg. Of course, some African Americans were able to retain their African or Muslim beliefs, while others fully embraced various Christian denominations; the majority were probably somewhere in-between. Religion, and more specifically Christianity, constitutes something African Americans and European Americans shared in Colonial Williamsburg and these beliefs "were manifested in everyday life in homes, at work, in law, and government, in education, and in our experience with the natural world" (*Interpreter* 1990, 5). Moreover, the religion of European American Virginians cannot be fully understood without accepting "the impact of African ideas, beliefs, and customs, had on the beliefs and values of white Virginians" (*Interpreter* 1990, 5). This type of inclusion has been achieved to a certain extent by Colonial Williamsburg for they have "included African American objectives at sites throughout the town and provided interpreters with training directed at these objectives" (Multicultural Committee 1991, 3). In portraying African Americans, Colonial Williamsburg should also be careful not to submerge disparate identities of the various African cultural groups present at Colonial Williamsburg the same way slavery attempted to do.

Colonial Williamsburg, however, also serves as a museum in the more

traditional sense of curating physical objects from the past. Here too, interpretational autonomy can be problematic. As Ralph Appelbaum points out, "There is no such thing as the last word on what the significance of an artifact is" (1993, 45). Rather than presenting artifacts as proof of one interpretation or another, the museum should make clear that this is only one probable explanation. Colonial Williamsburg could do this possibly, by further involving the visitors in the whole procurement, analysis, interpretation, and presentation process. This is sure to make the Colonial Williamsburg experience more exciting to the public as well.

Overall, African American history should, and to a certain extent does, form an integral part of Colonial Williamsburg, yet it is also one which offers peculiar difficulties. When the museum was first founded there was little inclination to address the lack of obvious sources of African American life or to spend time examining physical and literary evidence. It was only in the 1960s, with the emergence of the "new social history" coupled with the Civil Rights Movement, that the story of African Americans began to emerge. These "new social historians," accepting and attempting to include the growing multicultural society of the United States, applied African Americanist scholarship to Colonial Williamsburg. Yet, today there is still a danger that African American history will be treated differently than that of European Americans, that their story will be marginalized as relevant to the whole, and that the sensibilities of the present will dictate the interpretation taken. To do justice to the 'other half' at Colonial

Williamsburg it will be necessary to continue to mainstream African Americans into the story of the beginnings of the Republic. Through a more equitable presentation of our past, Colonial Williamsburg can help America grasp its dynamic multicultural society.

CHAPTER IV

SELECTIVE EXHIBITION PRACTICES AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

The discussion will now turn to the actual selective exhibition practices of Colonial Williamsburg in regards to the reconstructed slave quarter at Carters Grove plantation.

Furnishing of Carter's Grove Slave Quarters

According to Handler and Gable the "'new social historians' wanted to emphasize that history itself is a construct; a selective and willed account of a past that draws moral and political lessons that are shaped by current preoccupations and agendas" (Handler and Gable 1997, 78). According to their "constructionist" theory, history is more than the sum of the available facts; the construction of history depends on the view point of historians, on the messages or meanings that historians choose (perhaps unconsciously to convey)" (Handler and Gable 1997, 59). They relate that "One of the [Colonial Williamsburg] foundation's historians told us, 'we could tell 10,000 stories about the past, but we only tell one hundred.' It is such choices, to tell particular stories about a potentially infinite past, that account for the changing history at Colonial

Williamsburg" (Handler and Gable 1997, 60).

In order to understand the context in which these choices were made we need to know about the background of the furnishing and interpretive plan of the Carter's Grove slave quarters. One source of information is the December 1988 "Interpretive Plan for Carter's Grove Slave Quarters." One of its stated Interpretive Goals and Objectives is "To investigate the developing African-American culture and its influences on Virginia's culture" including the topic of "foodways" (4-5). Statement of Purpose 5 in the Interpretive Plan is "To explain the archaeological, architectural, and historical justification for the slave quarters" (5). This justification includes:

a. Current knowledge of what is and what is not known about slaves at Carter's Grove;

b. Evidence (or lack of evidence) for what is known about the buildings, people, and furnishings (5).

The furnishings of African American spaces were "based on available research as well as general knowledge of rural and lower class urban furnishings of this period in Tidewater Virginia" (Katz-Hyman 1993, 18). Information from archaeology, architecture, research, and collections was then organized by subject into the categories of "African life, food, food related equipment, free blacks, furniture, furnishings, health, housing, illicit behavior, laws and statutes, market economy, plantation life, skills, sleeping accommodations, social life, textiles, and tools" (Katz-Hyman 1993, 22-23).

Archaeology at Carter's Grove and other slave sites indicated many of the objects that would have been found at a slave quarter. This had a strong impact on the furnishings of Carter's Grove. A memo from Patricia Samford to Cary Carson dated May 3, 1988 brings up various problems associated with the artifact assemblage from Carter's Grove. Unfortunately the actual assemblage from Carter's Grove is not complete. As Samford states,

> The level of data recovery for the Carter's Grove assemblages is not known. Mr. Noel Hume [Former Director of the Department of Archaeology at Colonial Williamsburg] did not normally screen the soil from his excavations, which will make it difficult to compare with some of other root cellar assemblages particularly in terms of small faunal and botanical remains (7).

Slaves often kept things that they wanted hidden from their masters in root cellars which are found on archaeological sites of slave quarters. Root cellars were found at Carter's Grove as well as other area slave quarters such as George Washington's Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. These root cellars are important to reconstructing slaves' daily lives because they provide information that is not always in the written documents. The cellars were usually dug into the dirt floor of the slave cabin and then covered with wooden boards to conceal them. Faunal remains were recovered from these cellars as well as ceramics, metal, and glass artifacts. Often the cellars show evidence of food remains. Perhaps, these were kept to supplement provisions provided by their masters. Vegetables, poultry, local game, and seafood were the main food sources for many slaves. Various traveler journals and diaries of slave

holders reveal knowledge about the use of these root cellars.

But in 1993, Martha Katz-Hyman notes of this evidence, "it was one thing to have the written evidence and the archaeological evidence and draw theoretical conclusions from them. It was another thing entirely to take that evidence and those conclusions and translate them into actual objects installed in exhibition spaces used to interpret the lives of enslaved Africans" (Katz-Hyman, 135). While the curators had a "solid body of knowledge" to work with, important decisions had to be made which would determine exactly what should be placed at the quarter's. Martha Katz-Hyman explains, "There was a problem in what was found in the archaeology and translating it to the furnishing" there were "no pictures so we don't know how it was arranged...it was a challenge putting it all together" (Katz-Hyman; personal communication, October 1996). These furnishing decisions were also to be open to criticism and changes with increasing knowledge of slave life.

"Teaching history to the public is a social encounter with rules of its own, some of which are imposed on the situation by the museum (its values and expectations) and some by what the visitors bring to it" (Handler and Gable 1997, 13).

Martha Katz-Hyman writes, "If a pot or a blanket, a shirt or a pail is to be placed in a site, then every detail about it implies something about its creators and its owners. Its character, its condition, its signs of wear, and its implied use all have a message. Its absence can say as much as its presence" (1993, iv). She

explains that in the African American sites of Colonial Williamsburg, including Carter's Grove, "the buildings themselves, the objects they contain, and the uses implied in their arrangement are, aside from the verbal interpretation we present at the site, the most powerful means of communicating what it meant to be black and a slave in Tidewater Virginia in the eighteenth century" (Katz-Hyman 1993, iv).

We experience people in the ways they are represented. Rex Ellis explained in a phone interview that at Carter's Grove they "didn't want to focus on areas that were already stereotypically known of by the general public" (Ellis, personal communication; October 1997). Even though "80 percent of activity would have been in fields" they "wanted to focus on the time after the workday was over and move away from images of blacks in the field" (Ellis; personal communication, October 1996). Therefore they silenced the field slave and instead decided to focus on things related to domestic life including leisure, family life, relationships, and personal stories.

The furnishings for Carter's Grove were installed in March 1989 and installations continue as they become available. Inside the slave quarters the material culture of the slaves is displayed. This includes pots, beds, root cellars, earthenwares, food, and clothing. Outside the slave quarters show the activity areas external to the domestic sphere including a corn crib, fenced gardens, chicken runs, and swept yards. The tending of the gardens and the harvesting of the vegetables are some of the activities that are "demonstrated or implied" at the

quarters according to the Interpretive Plan (1989, 7).

Maria Franklin's article "Rethinking the Carter's Grove Slave Quarter Reconstruction: A Proposal," points out the silencing of the African American aesthetic in the initial furnishing of the Carter's Grove slave quarters. Franklin discusses the basic tenets of African American culture derived from Africa and explains how these can be interpreted at Carter's Grove. But she rejects the idea of acculturation widely held at Colonial Williamsburg and promotes creolization, "where both European and African cultures played major roles in the creation of an African American identity" (Franklin, 159). To this end, Franklin emphasizes the need to consider unconventional sources such as ethnographies, social histories, and archaeology (Franklin, 159). Christy Matthews also commented on the importance of including the development of African American culture at Carter's Grove and reflected, "Africans came empty handed not empty headed" (Matthews; personal communication, October 1996). Since Franklins' article there have been many changes at Carter's Grove and other African American sites relating to her criticisms.

Silences in the Carter's Grove Slave Quarters

Silences helps us understand the dynamics of silencing at work in the Carter's Grove slave quarter. Katz-Hyman explains there is a "tension between entertaining and educating" (Katz-Hyman; personal communication, October 1996). For example, Handler and Gable nicknamed the Patriot's Tour the "invisible landscape tour" because every interpreter spent so much time calling

our attention to what the [Colonial Williamsburg] foundation was effectively disguising," including lights, garbage cans, fire hydrants, soda machines etc. (Handler and Gable 1997, 57).

At the Carter's Grove slave quarters some items have been "silenced" or are not shown for simple reasons. For example, in a memo from Martha Katz-Hyman dated October 26, 1994 it is mentioned that some items were removed "for safekeeping and/or cleaning" (1). Other items, such as knives and "sharp tools" were deliberately removed for "security considerations,...as well as the more valuable and/or easily stolen reproductions, leading to an unintended loss of interpretive opportunities" (1).

A key example of silences at work comes with the issue of watermelon consumption by the slaves. According to Christy Matthew's January 1996 paper "Where Do We Go From Here?" the African American Interpretations and Presentations Department, of which she was Director, has still, "not tackled whether or not we ought to plant watermelon in the slave gardens as indicated by the excavations at the site" (4). Christy Matthews also explained that though she did not know who decided to not show the watermelon growing or being eaten they were "using knowledge selectively to not harm" (Matthews; personal communication, October 1997). The question becomes: Is the watermelon being kept out of Carter's Grove because interpretations at Colonial Williamsburg must be politically correct or because European Americans still call the shots, and stereotypes have not gone away? Whether or not the latter is the case, the

African American interpreters certainly know that the watermelon could perpetuate this stereotype. As a result the flat two-dimensions of a stereotype could undercut their messages about the multi-dimensional reality of African American life and culture. Yet as Richard Handler and his co-authors state in 1992,

> One historian explained that eighteenth-century illustrations and crop records indicate watermelon was a major staple in the summer diet of Virginia slaves and by far the most widely grown crop. During the first year that the quarter was open to the public, curators placed watermelon pieces and rinds in the houses and had watermelon planted in the quarter garden. However, interpreters resisted what they felt was black stereotyping, and the curators apparently agreed. The watermelon was removed from the cabins, and the next year other kinds of melons were grown and displayed, even though statistical data- the social historians' facts- indicated the overwhelming presence of watermelon (Handler etc., 802).

Clearly, though there is evidence for slaves eating it, watermelon is not shown growing at the slave quarters so as not to encourage the stereotype held in America that African Americans have an overwhelming hunger for watermelon.

Evidence for Watermelon at Carter's Grove Slave Quarters

A brief history of the watermelon plant in America and its consumption will give an understanding that watermelon was a fruit commonly eaten by both African and European Americans in the United States during the eighteenth century. Watermelons were noted as appearing in New Jersey sometime after 1714. "Portuguese ships carried African foods to the New World- okra, coriander, ...tamarind and watermelon," (Yentsch, 1994). Stacy Gibbons Moore

states "Varieties of melons and fruit trees, which thrived early in Virginia, offered seasonal foods to more than a few. A former slave of Charlotte County remembered that, "Dey was peach trees, en apple trees, dat us could have fo usself. Co'se us had watermellons en mush melons also" (74). Moore also includes information on West African culinary practices and states, "Native melons, notably watermelons, were valued for their thirst quenching juices" (76).

Another instance of the consumption of watermelon is in the "Travel Journal of William Hugh Grove" in which Grove travels to Virginia and comments on watermelons "But they cherish Esteem the Water Melon, which is green, as bigg as a Pump(k)in smooth, not furrowed> They Eat it as an apple, but in my opinion (it is too flatt and Waterish). They say (eating) it hurts no one, even in fever" (Stiverson and Butler, 34-35). Anne Yentsch states in 1994, "some travelers observed they were so plentiful that it was their belief no farmer or poor person planted a garden without watermelon" (214). Katz-Hyman notes the travel journal of John Davis which mentioned "Dick, a slave owned by Spencer Ball in Spottsylvania County, was allowed to build a log house, grow corn, and watermelon, and raise chickens," (Katz-Hyman 1993, 66). "In August 1820, Martha Ogle Forman noted in her diary that their slaves had "a water melon feast," (Katz-Hyman 1993, 111). Not only was watermelon used for food by the slaves, but also to trade and sell.

Even though Katz-Hyman states, "The sustained nature of journals and diaries and the attention given by many diaries and journal-keepers to details of

everyday life meant that slave-related furnishings mentioned with some regularity in such a source were strong candidates for inclusion at any slave site," (Katz-Hyman 1993, 42) watermelons are not shown growing at the Carter's Grove slave quarters.

Many archaeological studies of slave sites have also revealed watermelon seeds. Historical archaeologist Anne Yentsch states, "Some of the seeds and nuts (squash, pumpkin, peanut, and watermelon seeds) found at the Calvert site [Annapolis, Maryland] may well have been there because African slaves lived and worked in the governor's household" (Yentsch 1995, 3). Anne Yentsch conservatively attributed the watermelon seeds she found at this archaeological site associated with African Americans to squirrels, but notes that the items were probably grown or used close to the Calvert household since squirrels have small territories.

This summary of sources shows that there is considerable evidence that watermelon was a significant part of the diet of enslaved people during the Colonial period. Today it is not shown growing at the Carter's Grove slave quarters. However, the (stated or unstated) reason for this "silence" is to avoid perpetuating the stereotype held in America that African Americans have an overwhelming hunger for watermelon.

The Watermelon Stereotype

It is important here to give a background of the stereotype of African Americans having an insatiable desire for watermelon. This stereotype, as all

stereotypes, serves to help self-fulfilling prophecies of European Americans which have strong roots in slavery, racism, and oppression. An uncontrollable desire for watermelons is one of the attributes of the child/savage and mammy images.

African Americans associated with watermelons were a common motif of African American memorabilia. African Americans were shown in figurines dating between the 1880s to the 1930s voraciously eating the fruit. Typically, the watermelon is displayed in the shape of a grin and is accented by teethmarks. "The figures, usually children, but sometimes adult males, are shown to be almost savagely biting into watermelon, attacking it like animals" (Goings, 50). The bright, primary (read primitive) colors of the watermelon were thought to be attractive to African Americans.

Folktales also told of slaves escaping into the watermelon patch at night to steal and eat the watermelons to cure their appetite. The slaves were then caught by the master because while their dark skin concealed them at night, the whites of their eyes, like those of a wild scavenger (such as the racoon), gave them away. This reinforced the myth that "the only honest darky is a dead darky." For these reasons, the watermelon would continue to be associated with African American memorabilia into the 1950s (Goings, 40).

A lore of watermelon was a characteristic of many of the stereotypical figures promoted by European Americans. One of these figures was the Coon, which was also a denigrating term regularly used for African Americans in the

South. This term carried the double connotation of cluck and fool, and an irresponsible, thievish character (the Zip Coon). Originally the term derived from the racoon, with its black snout and large white eyes. "Coon songs" of minstrel shows were popular from the 1890s onwards (Pieterse, 135). The sheet-music covers of coon minstrel songs were racist, showing African Americans with "lips like watermelons, eyes like saucers, wild curly hair and elongated bodies" (Pieterse, 135). One minstrel song in particular, contained the stereotype: "'The Coon's Trade-mark: A Watermelon, Razor, Chicken, and a Coon'(1890's)" (Pieterse, 136).

The Mammy figure, which is still used today on television and even in Aunt Jemima products, can be found in many African American collectibles. Mammy also "often figured in children's stories, such as the well-known Bobbsey Twins series (from 1904), which featured Dinah the cook as 'the ultimate stereotype of the Contented Slave, The Buxom Mammy, and the superstitious, watermelon-eating, eye-rolling, thieving black'" (B. Banfield quoted in Pieterse, 154).

Comic strips during the 1890s also displayed African Americans eating watermelons which reflected the increased racial segregation of the time period. "American comics classed Negroes as 'frightened darkies,' shoeshine boys, railway porters, and watermelon stealers'" (D. Gifford quoted in Pieterse, 170).

Pumpkins and melons have also been common signifiers of tropical

abundance. "Fruit was the classic symbol of plenty, commonly used to denote the natural fertility of the tropics, and hence the 'natural laziness' of blacks. The water-melon suggests sloth, gluttony, lack of self-control, childlike needs; additionally it may carry sexual overtones. Bananas and coconuts have also been associated with blacks" (Pieterse, 199). Watermelons can be seen to be sexual and exotic.

CHAPTER V

THE LEGACY OF *SILENCES* BY TILLIE OLSEN

The "silences" Tillie Olsen addresses are "not natural silences," (8) they are the relationship between creation and circumstances. According to Olsen, *Silences*, "is concerned with the relationship of circumstances- including class, color, sex; the times, climate into which one is born- to the creation of literature." Olsen explores this relationship between circumstances and silences in literature. These silences are "long silences...the hidden silences; work aborted, deferred, denied- hidden by the work which does not come to fruition" (8).

Olsen explains the silences in literature as a stopping of the creative process because of the writer's circumstances. The slave quarter exhibit has also been affected by the circumstances under which it was created and maintained causing silences within its presentation. The slave quarter also has inherent in its presentation the silences within the institution of slavery.

Olsen lists and defines the various kinds of silence in literature quoting Virginia Woolf, "To discuss and define them is, I think, of great value and importance, for thus only can the labour be shared, the difficulties be solved" (Woolf in Olsen, 256). Olsen meditates on a kind of silence, the "things unsaid"

(39). Censorship silences, as already discussed, also afflict the plight of writers. These silences include the writers having to censor themselves, withhold work, and also be censored by publishers (142-143). This relates quite well to the "things unsaid" in the slave quarter.

Political silences plague both literature and museum practices. Olsen explains that writers continue to write even though "political involvement takes priority...Every freedom movement has, and has had, its roll of writers participating at the price of their writing" (143). There are the "silences of the marginal- The writer of that class, sex, color still marginal in literature, and whose coming to voice at all against complex odds is exhausting achievement" (146). Absences of works that were never written or came to be books are also "a Kind of Silence" (147). As Ranier Maria Rilke states, "It is the great quantity of what is not done that lies with all its weight on what wants to come out of the soil" (Rilke in Olsen, 162). This quote can be taken quite literally for the archaeological evidence that is not portrayed at Carter's Grove.

Olsen also discloses the diverse forms of circumstances including devaluation, critical attitudes, restriction, and constriction. These constrictive definitions of what women should be are a "complex problem for women writing in our time" (43). It involves:

> pressures towards censorship, self-censorship; toward accepting, abiding by entrenched attitudes, thus falsifying one's own reality, range, vision, truth, voice, are extreme for women writers (indeed have much to do with the fear, the sense of powerlessness that pervades certain of our book, the "above all, amuse" tone of others). Not to be

> able to come to one's truth or not to use it in one's writing, even in telling the truth having to "tell it slant"(Olsen, 44).

The slave quarters do not show everything and therefore are not accurate representations. The presentation is slanted toward the visitor who is uncomfortable about certain things being shown or talked about and therefore does not know how to react to them. Because of the silences at work in the slave quarter a more complete picture of slave life is not represented. What is shown is only a partial expression of the complete picture of slave history. Olsen explains because of these circumstances a female writer has to write "Like a Man" (249). Women deny:

> profound (woman) life comprehensions and experiences expression...Casting (embodying) deepest comprehensions and truths in the character or voice of a male...In writing of women, characterizations, material, understandings, identical to that of most male writers...Refusing "womens sphere" subjects altogether...Writing in dominant male forms, style, although what seeks to be expressed might seek otherwise...Proclaiming that one's sex has nothing to do with one's writing (Olsen, 249-250).

In the same way, the lives of the slaves at Carter's Grove are not told in their voice, but through the screen of today's politically correct museum workers. Olsen finds this problem of 'writing like a man' to be most horrid because of the need to tell "the truth...: a necessary, freeing subject for the woman writer" (255). Olsen comments on the works of African American women Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth which "come to us filtered through the words of others: words they were not able to read to correct or change" (184).

Olsen makes it clear to her reader that she is exposing these silences in literature because she sees them as wrongs. She states, "surely it is evident that heretofore, and in what follows, I am writing of (and against) pressures, impediments, to what should rightfully be the writer's fullest freedom to write anything- in any sex, voice, style- in accordance with the best need of whatever seeks expression" (251).

In the chapter entitled "Other Obstacles, Balks, Encumbrances in Coming to One's Own Voice, Vision, Circumference" Olsen states,

> Do not forget:
> The overwhelmingness of the dominant.
> The daily saturation.
> Isolations.
> The knife of the perfectionist attitude.
> The insoluble.
> Economic imperatives (Olsen, 256).

Olsen is focusing here on fear of the dominant, "the need to please, to be safe- in the literary realm too. Founded fear. Power is still in the hands of men. Power of validation, publication, approval, reputation, coercions, penalties" (257). One can see a parallel between the "men" Olsen talks about and the European Americans, both visiting and working, at Colonial Williamsburg.

Critiques of *Silences*

Since Tillie Olsen's first talk focusing on "silences" and later her book *Silences*, an entire generation of feminist writers and literary critics have dealt with and expanded on her idea. By 1986 Elizabeth Meese referred to *Silences* as "one of the most frequently cited texts of twentieth-century feminism" (Meese,

91). For over twenty five years Tillie Olsen's thoughts in *Silences* have influenced many women writers and critics of women's literature. There has even been a collection *Listening to Silences*, edited by Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "intended both to trace a genealogy and to offer a spectrum of ways in which contemporary feminist criticism continues to respond to Olsen's discoveries" (Hedges and Fisher Fishkin, 5). Fisher Fishkin states, "*Silences* changed what we read in the academy, what we write, and what we count; it also gave us some important tools to understand and address many of the literary, social, economic, and political silencings of the future" (24). Fisher Fishkin also cites Catherine Stimpson who acknowledges *Silences* as, "simply one of the texts that helped to found a field" (29). The silences that Olsen studied were largely caused by external factors. By the mid 1980s there began a new trend toward focusing on her treatment of internal silences as well (Hedges and Fisher Fishkin, 5).

African American feminist criticism has also called to attention the silences or silencing of a literature that has been deemed "minor" by mainstream American literary tradition. "One of the major goals of this scholarship has been the recovery of nineteenth-century texts by African American women that have been written out of literary history and thus lost to twentieth-century readers" (Peterson, 97). Carla L. Peterson examines the silences in Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*. Peterson presents Harper, an African American woman author, as being faced in her writing with a "conspiratorial silence" (Peterson,

104). This silences builds on W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of the "conspiracy of silence," which surrounded "the bodies and souls of black folk and the role they were to play in the political economy of postbellum white America" (Peterson, 104). Harper had to decide how to represent the labor conditions of the African American peasantry and the working class while attending to the sensibilities of both African Americans and European Americans. Here, the situation faced by the author, Harper, is a product of the times similar to the Carter's Grove situation and the complexities of portraying African American history at a public museum.

CHAPTER VI

SILENCES DURING RESEARCH

During the research for this paper, I held five oral interviews on the phone and/or in person. After two years of continuously attempting to hold interviews with Carter's Grove interpreters, I have had to rely primarily on written sources. Most of the interpreters were tired of being interviewed by other researchers and did not want to divulge much information. When I was able to talk to Colonial Williamsburg employees I asked them about the watermelon and who made the decision to not show the watermelon being grown. Everyone said they did not make that decision and passed me off to someone else. Other researchers I have talked to said they also have noticed the same hesitation on the part of Colonial Williamsburg employees about discussing interpretations of African American life. According to Colonial Williamsburg employees, they did not want to divulge any information because of negative previous experiences with researchers. So basically, though there is much written about the African American interpretations at Colonial Williamsburg, when it comes to oral interviews, the record is less eloquent. Handler and Gable explain their difficulties in research,

> During the time of our research, the history of slavery was one of the top priorities of the foundations social historians. Yet, as we repeatedly observed, both front line and backstage personnel felt uncomfortable with that topic and consequently tended to avoid or gloss over it. They were able to justify their discomfort, while avoiding the taint of explicit racism, because they believed that black history was, as they often complained, 'undocumented'- it verged on fiction; it never quite had the same just-the-facts authenticity as the stories the could tell about the elite white inhabitants of the town (Handler and Gable 1997, 84).

CONCLUSION

Shelley Fisher Fishkin states *Silences* "has helped us understand the dynamics of 'silencing' and has given us the tools to cry 'foul' when we see in action the forces that silence. In addition to the silences of the past, Olsen's book addresses the silencings of the present and potential silencings of the future" (Fisher Fishkin, 34). King-Kok Cheung alternatively states, "Certainly language can liberate and heal, but it can also distort and hurt; and while silence may smother and obliterate, it can also minister, soothe, and communicate" (Cheung, 114). Lillian S. Robinson believes even further, "Just as contemporary literary theory has enabled us to conceive discourse as action, it should make it possible for us to understand action as discourse and thereby to read political action as a form of articulation, rather than its absence, as speech rather then as silence" (Robinson, 288). This is how the absence of the watermelon plant at Carter's Grove can be seen as a political and social action, rather than a suppression of information. Issues such as these that Colonial Williamsburg faces imply that efforts to include African American history and multiculturalism need to continue everywhere in society so that racism and prejudices, along with stereotypes, can be eradicated. There is a reciprocal relationship between

material culture and society, so that when historical and cultural circumstances and society are altered the meanings of the African American social experience also change. The practice of eating watermelon became a demeaning action for African Americans when European Americans appropriated it as a negative symbol to fulfill their dominating expectations which show Africans Americans as inferior. These activities were part of their practices to silence Africans Americans and to thwart their achievement.

The silence of the watermelon in the slave quarter also points to the circumstances of the time period we are living in. Considering that Colonial Williamsburg will not portray watermelons at an African American associated site, the Carter's Grove slave quarter, it is apparent that this stereotype is still alive today. The "silencing" of the watermelon at the quarter should not really be a viewed as limitation or omission by Colonial Williamsburg, but rather as a reflection of the larger society. These selective exhibiting practices undertaken by Colonial Williamsburg reveal much about the racism, prejudice, stereotypes, and ignorance that continue to plague American society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Appelbaum, Ralph. "Multi-Cultural By Design" in *Museum News*. March-April 1993.

Birney, Robert. "Researching Black History at Colonial Williamsburg" in *The Interpreter*. Pages 4-6. Vol. 9 No. 1. November 1988.

Blakely, Michael. "American Nationality and Ethnicity in the Depicted Past" in *The Politics Of The Past*. Edited by Peter Gathercole and David Lowenthal. Pages 38-48. 1990.

Braxton, Joanne M. and Sharon Zuber. "Silences in Harriet 'Linda Brent' Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" in *Listening to Silences* edited by Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. Oxford University Press, New York. 1994.

Brown, A.G.. "Carters Grove" in *The Interpreter*. Vol. 7 No. 4. Pages 1-6. July 1986.

Butler, Reginald. "Afro-American Tour of Colonial Williamsburg" in *The Interpreter*. Vol. 2 No. 6. Pages 1-3. November 1981.

"Carter's Grove Slave Quarter Interpretive Plan" December 1988.

Carter's Grove Quarter Study Group. "Minutes from Meetings." April 11, 1985-July 25, 1985.

Chappell, Edward. "Slave Housing" in "Fresh Advices" in *The Interpreter*. Pages i,ii. November 1982.

Chappell, Edward. "Social Responsibility and the American History Museum." *Winterthur Portfolio*. 24(4):247-265, 1989.

Cheung, King-Kok. "Attentive Silence in Joy Kogawa's Obasan" in *Listening to Silences* edited by Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. Oxford University Press, New York. 1994.

Chorley, Kenneth. *Colonial Williamsburg: The First Twenty-Five Years. A Report By the President.* December 31, 1951.

Clawson, Michelle Carr. "In A Different Tongue" in *Colonial Williamsburg Magazine*. Pages 32-33. Winter 1994-1995.

Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. *Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg.* Published by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1985.

Colonial Williamsburg Magazine. "Black History Forum" Spring 1990.

Colonial Williamsburg News. "African American Presence Could Be Stronger, Pros Say" Vol. 46. No. 6. February 12, 1993.

Colonial Williamsburg News. "African American Interpretation More Than Slavery." Thursday, September 26, 1996.

Crew, Spencer. "Giving Life to Black History" in *The Interpreter.* Pages 3, 7, 8. Vol. 9 No.1. November 1988.

Dunkley, Diane L. "Rationale for Furnishing Carter's Grove Slave Quarters." October 14, 1987. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg.

Edwards, Ywone D. "Special Report: Archaeology and Public Education At Colonial Williamsburg" in *Society for Historical Archaeology Newsletter.* Volume 28, Number 2. Pages 19, 20. June 1995.

Ellis, Rex. "A Decade of Change: Black History at Colonial Williamsburg" in *Colonial Williamsburg Magazine*. Spring 1990.

Ellis, Rex. "Black Programs Come of Age" in *The Interpreter*. Vol. 7 No. 3. May 1986.

Ellis, Rex. Personal Phone Interview. October 1996.

Ellis, Rex. "Presenting the Past: Education, Interpretation, and the Teaching of Black History at Colonial Williamsburg." PhD Dissertation: Department of Education, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA. 1989.

Franklin, Maria. "Rethinking the Carter's Grove Slave Quarter Reconstruction: A Proposal." Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in *Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers.* No. 79 Pages 147-164.

Gaither, Edmund Barry. "'Hey! That's Mine' : Thoughts on Pluralism and American Museums" in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*. Edited by Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig. Temple University Press. Philadelphia, PA. 1986.

Garfield, Donald. "Dimensions of Diversity" in *Museum News*. Pages 43-48. March/April 1989.

Gill, Harold. "The Distress of Sam and Caty" in *Colonial Williamsburg Magazine*. Page 14-23. Spring 1990.

Goings, Kenneth W.. *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping*. Indiana University Press. 1994.

Grove, William Hugh. "The Travel Journal of William Hugh Grove" edited by Gregory A. Stiverson and Patrick H. Butler III in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*. Volume 85. 1997.

Handler, Richard and Eric Gable. "After Authenticity at an American Heritage Site" in *American Anthropologist*. American Anthropological Association. 98 (3): 568-578. 1996.

Handler, Richard and Eric Gable and Anna Lawson. "On the Uses of Relativism: Fact, Conjecture, and Black and White Histories at Colonial Williamsburg" in *American Ethnologist*. 19 (4) Pages 791-805. November 1992.

Handler, Richard and Eric Gable "Colonialist Anthropology at Colonial Williamsburg" in *Museum Anthropology*. Vol. 17 No. 3. 1993.

Handler, Richard.. "Who Owns the Past? History, Cultural Property, and Logic of Possessive Individualism" in *The Politics of Culture*. Edited by Brett Williams. Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C.. 1991.

Hedges, Elaine and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, editors. *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*. Oxford University Press, New York. 1994.

Interpreter, The. Page 5. Vol. 11. No. 3. November 1990.

James, Curtia. "To Live Like a Slave" in *Colonial Williamsburg Magazine*. Pages 14-25. Autumn 1993.

Kaplan, Carla. "Reading Feminist Readings: Recuperative Reading and the Silent Heroine of Feminist Criticism" in *Listening to Silences* edited by Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. Oxford University Press, New York. 1994.

Katz-Hyman, Martha. "'In the Middle of This Poverty Some Cups and a Teapot:'" The Material Culture of Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Virginia and the Furnishings of Slave Quarters at Colonial Williamsburg." January 1993.

Katz-Hyman, Martha. Personal Interview. October 1996.

Katz-Hyman, Martha. Reports on Slave Quarter Refurnishing Meetings. 10/26/94-12/19/94.

Laurence, Patricia. "Women's Silence as a Ritual of Truth: A Study of Literary Expressions in Austen, Bronte, and Woolf" in *Listening to Silences* edited by Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. Oxford University Press, New York. 1994.

Leone, Mark P. "A Multicultural African-American Historical Archaeology: How to Place Archaeology in the Community in a State Capital" Pages 1-9. Presented at Anthropology in the Nation: Multiculturalism, Race and Racism (Presidential Session). American Anthropological Association, Annual Meeting. December 5, 1992.

Leone, Mark P. and Parker B. Potter. "Establishing the Roots of Historical Consciousness in Modern Annapolis, Maryland" in *Presenting the Past; Essays on History and the Public*. Edited by Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig. Temple University Press. Philadelphia, PA. 1986.

Leone, Mark P. "Exhibition Reviews" in *The Journal of American History*. Pages 1082-1087. December 1992a.

Leviner, Betty. "Reflections of Time: Changes in the Houses" in *The Interpreter*. Vol. 8 No. 6. November 1987.

Matthews, Christy S. Personal Phone Interview. October 1996.

Matthews, Christy S.. "Where Do We Go From Here? Researching and Interpreting the African American Experience." Paper presented for the Society of Historical Archaeology, Cincinnati, OH. January 1996.

Moore, Stacy Gibbons. "Established and Well Cultivated" in *Virginia Cavalcade*. Volume 39, Number 2. Pages 70-83. Autumn 1989.

Multicultural Steering Committee of Colonial Williamsburg. "Developing a Multi-Cultural Interpretive Program at Colonial Williamsburg." March 23, 1991.

Official Guidebook of Colonial Williamsburg. First Edition. 1951.

Olsen, Tillie. *Silences*. Delacorte Press, New York. 1978.

Orser, Charles E.. *A Historical Archaeology of the Modern World*. Plenum Press, New York. 1996.

O'Toole, Dennis. "Interpreting the Black Experience at Colonial Williamsburg" in *The Interpreter*. Vol. 9 No. 1. Page 1. January 1988.

Peterson, Carla L.. "'Further Liftings of the Veil:' Gender, Class, and Labor in Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*" in *Listening to Silences* edited by Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. Oxford University Press, New York. 1994.

Pieterse, Jan Nederveen. *White On Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*. Yale University Press, New Haven. 1992.

Robinson, Lillian S.. "Filling in the Silences: Tillie Olsen's Reading Lists" in *Listening to Silences* edited by Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. Oxford University Press, New York. 1994.

Ruffins, Fath Davis. "Mythos, Memory and History: African American Preservation Efforts, 1820-1990" in *Presenting the Past; Essays on History and The Public*. Edited by Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, Roy Rosenzweig. Pages 506-611. Temple University Press. Philadelphia, PA. 1986.

Samford, Patricia. "Carter's Grove Slave Quarters Study." May 3, 1988.

Samford, Patricia. "Presenting 'The Other Half' Archaeology and African American Interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg." Paper presented for the Society of Historical Archaeology. January 1991.

Singleton, Theresa. "Carter's Grove" in *American Anthropologist*. Pages 525-528. Vol. 95 No. 2. June 1993.

Sullivan, Robert. "New Traditions: Towards a New Museum Ethnography." Paper Presented at Many Pasts, Many Visions: Interpreting Cultural Diversity. Philadelphia, PA. June 16-18, 1994.

Tate, Thad W.. *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg.* University Press of Virginia, VA. 1965.

Tolbert, Bill. "CW Explains the Enclaves" in *The Virginia Gazette.* Pages 1a, 2a, 7a. April 1998.

Toppin, Edar A.. "Setting the Record Straight: African-Americans and History" in *Colonial Williamsburg Magazine.* Pages 10-12. Spring 1990.

Underhill, Roy. "Where the People Lived" in *Colonial Williamsburg Magazine.* Pages 15-20. Summer 1988.

White, Bill. "'Becoming Americans': The Interpretive Story at Colonial Williamsburg" in *The Interpreter.* Vol. 15 No. 3. Pages 1-3. November 1994.

Wilson, Patricia. "Historic Preservation and the African American Community." Number 5, 1994.

Yentsch, Anne. *A Chesapeake Family and Their Slaves.* Cambridge University Press, New York. 1994.

Yentsch, Anne. "Hot, Nourishing, and Culturally Potent: The Transfer of West African Cooking Traditions to the Chesapeake." 1995.

VITA

Nicole Carroll

Born in White Plains, New York, February 27, 1974. Graduated from John Jay High School in East Fishkill, NY, June 1992. B.A. in Anthropology and History May 1996 from the State University of New York at Binghamton. M.A. in American Studies May 1999 from the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

Museum Educator at the Southeast Museum, Brewster, NY May 1997-February 1998; Curator at the Bedford Historical Society, Bedford, NY May 1997- February 1998; Library Assistant at the Brewster Public Library, Brewster, NY August 1997- February 1998; Public Programs Coordinator at Philipse Manor Hall State Historic Site, Yonkers, NY February 1998- March 1999; Assistant Events and Public Relations Coordinator at the Garden Conservancy, Cold Spring, NY March 1999-present.