

# Slavery in the North: Forgetting History and Recovering Memory

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***Slavery in the North: Forgetting History and Recovering Memory.* Ross, Marc Howard. University of Pennsylvania Press, August 2018. 320 pp. \$39.95 Paperback.**

Marc Howard Ross's *Slavery in the North: Forgetting History and Recovering Memory* charts the history of Northern slavery, how the North forgot this history, and how individuals and groups now seek to commemorate the lives of the Northern enslaved. The book project began with his initial study of the President's House/Slavery Memorial at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia. Here, George Washington's ownership of slaves eventually emerged from obscurity around 2002. Over the course of a decade, Ross explored specific questions related to this site and general questions about the collective memory of Northern slavery: how did we forget about the nine enslaved Africans owned by President George Washington while he was in Philadelphia? How was this history forgotten if Washington was one of the well-known figures in American history? What does this collective forgetting say about slavery in the North? By exploring these questions and others, Ross synthesizes scholarship on Northern slavery while speaking to academic and popular debates on collective memory, forgetting, and memorialization. In terms of memory recovery and maintaining collective memory over time, Ross leans heavily on the need for "visible prominent sites on the public landscape" (253);

such sites, like the President's House/Slavery Memorial, aid the telling of compelling narrative, create emotional connections, and provide space for public rituals and ceremonies.

In the introduction, Ross avoids easy answers on why the memory of Northern slavery was forgotten. For example, some say the history was forgotten because slavery in the North was "not very important" (12) or that "there is very little written records concerning slavery in the region" (14). Both claims obscure the reality that Northerners forgot slavery for other reasons. Before covering the reasons in full, Ross offers an interesting example of memory recovery in recent years: the African Burial Ground in lower Manhattan. This burial ground—the space where people of African descent were buried in colonial New York, since they were not allowed burial within city walls—was discovered in the early 1990s. It quickly became a site of contestation. Feeling an emotional-historical connection to the burial site, a number of New York's African Americans protested the way that the General Services Administration (GSA) improperly treated the site. Eventually, it became a memorial where "the narrative of slavery in New York became more visible than it had been in many decades" (30). As sacred, memorialized ground, it is a space where formal acts of remembrance can be held. This has broadened the location's impact on memory recovery.

Ross's first chapter "Collective Memory," a theoretical chapter, helpfully probes how remembering takes place. Most critically, slavery in the North was collectively forgotten (never in *entirety*) for the following reasons:

Collective memories are found in narratives groups tell about themselves, in social enactments and representations that occur in ceremonies and rituals, and in public and commemorative landscapes and the objects associated with them. [38]

The North did not develop collective memories of Northern slavery because it was bereft of the narratives, sites, and rituals related to the active remembrance of slavery. [The reason *why* is the subject of chapter three.] For collective memories to last, narratives must be adapted or reconstructed for social and political changes. The emotional valence of a narrative is key to a site's ongoing relevance and thus its use for ritual and ceremony. In the North, everything related to establishing a collective memory of Northern slavery seemed to push in the opposite direct, toward forgetting.

Chapters two and three, "Surveying Enslavement in the North" and "Slavery and Collective Forgetting," are both thorough, nuanced, and fairly concise. Ross explores the contexts that shaped how different colonies, and eventually states, directly or indirectly benefited from slavery. He surveys the extant scholarship to highlight the differences between slavery in the North and South, alongside different slave owners in the North. Ross challenges some common assumptions about slavery in the North, namely that because it was family-based and supposedly more intimate, it was somehow less problematic.

Slavery in the North could be just as pernicious as that of the South. Restrictive and violent slave codes persisted in the North, as did important control systems used by enslavers. Ross also resurrects stories of runaways and resistance, proving that the hopes and the attitudes of the enslaved moved toward freedom over bondage. Likewise, the fact that most Blacks in the North were not enslaved by the early part of the nineteenth century did not magically change white Northerners' persistent racism. With this helpful, nuanced history, chapter two could stand on its own as undergraduate or graduate reading summarizing the history of Northern slavery.

In chapter three, Ross also moves beyond simply saying that white racism was responsible for forgetting slavery's presence in the North. This explanation does not account for the complicated reasons *how* and *why* forgetting takes place. After all, Blacks largely forgot the memory of Northern slavery, partly due to the actions of white Northerners, but also partly due to painful memories related to slavery. Massive demographic shifts of Blacks in and to Northern cities complicated collective memory as well. Chapter three offers six collected reasons why slavery was forgotten in the North, relying heavily on the work of Paul Connerton. The six reasons, which Ross explains in full, are: a decline in narrative usefulness, the destruction of sites of memory, incentives to forget, painful memories, shame or guilt, and narrative reframing. The Civil War's impact on narrative construction in the North was a major factor prompting the forgetting of a shameful past.

Chapters four through seven wrestle with particular cases in contemporary collective memory recovery. Chapters four and five center on intense conflicts over memorializing enslaved people at the aforementioned President's House/Slavery Memorial. Ross historicizes how the Liberty Bell became a national sacred object in the American mythos after the Civil War, extending into the Cold War and up to today. Although the National Park Service knew since 1970 that enslaved persons had lived in the President's House, the city "did not think it was especially important" (125) in light of other narratives and objects, like the Liberty Bell. Thus it remained hidden to most Philadelphians. Only in the early twenty-first century, with scholarly attention and media coverage the tide began to change. A range of citizens and organizations demanded that the story of the enslaved be told. Two important groups were the Avenging the Ancestors Coalition (ATAC) and Ad Hoc Historians. Ross was a participant-observer in the ATAC and shows, therefore, a nuanced understanding of what was at stake for different individuals and groups who vigorously discussed how to make the history of Northern enslavement more visible. Reviews were mixed when the memorial site finally opened after eight years of debate, disagreement, and construction. As Ross assesses the site, aspects of the memorial and its narrative have not encouraged significant visitor interest or the extended stay of visitors beyond a passing glance. While Ross praises the memorial's addition to an American sacred space, he himself

observed how the site has little signage (and no map or park rangers) that can lead visitors through the intended narrative most effectively.

Chapter six contrasts the many memorial-educational sites devoted to Southern slavery versus less prominent physical reminders of slavery in the North. Most notably in this chapter, Ross shows how historians have identified sites where enslaved persons lived in the North. His overview highlights how cities and states have started to wrestle with their direct and indirect participation in the slave trade. Ross's argument in chapter six revolves around the need for visual markers of Northern slavery. He claims: "collective memories have a far better chance to persist when they are associated with or made visible on prominent commemorative and public landscapes" (208).

Like chapter six, chapter seven addresses the work of Northern towns and cities in marking recently discovered, sometimes excavated, burial grounds of African people. While these cases cannot be described in full here, it is worth noting that the chapter extends Ross's discussion of "visible presence on the public landscape" to show how memories need "the landscape and objects on it...to be described and interpreted in ways that establish emotional connections for people" (234). Establishing emotional connections sometimes requires challenging or amending the public's sacred narratives about a place or a person. This leads to emotionally charged contests over memorialization, but it can also lead to future opportunities for the recovery of collective memory.

Ross's theoretical work on collective memory is robust. He accomplishes an excellent synthesis of scholarship on memory studies and the history of Northern slavery. Most important, he argues that rather than observing the change toward greater recognition of Northern slavery as sparked by a single event, it has been a slow process of memory recovery, spurred by "partially related events," such as discoveries, scholarly analysis, media interest, popular culture, advocacy groups, and the wider American context. Intersecting actors and factors have created a snowball effect to bring attention to Northern slavery and the North's legacy of racism. Despite heated debates, often but not always mapped along racial lines, important alliances between white Americans and black Americans emerged in order to recover history and enable memorialization.

*Slavery in the North* could have used a theoretical exploration on denial and history. As scholarship on denial has grown in recent years, scholars like Ross must wrestle with denial and its connection to certain narratives of slavery. Ross notes the "Lost Cause" narrative of the Civil War, which claims that slavery was an incident but not a cause of the Civil War. This narrative is still partly operative in the South and the North. What does the persistence of the "Lost Cause" narrative, or refusals to remember certain aspects of Northern slavery, say about the denial of history? Where or when does forgetting end and denial begin? Many of the theorists and works with which Ross dialogues do not address the denial of history. At one point, Ross even mentions the work of Paul

Connerton from *How Modernity Forgets* (2009), who, he claims, considers issues of denial. Connerton, however, does not consider denial in a systematically robust and theoretical fashion. Ross could have used analysis on the denial of history to address other facets of forgetting. Indeed, the “Lost Cause” narrative *as* a denial and distortion of the past has gained traction in public discourse surrounding the memory of the Civil War. Despite this gap, Ross’s book is still an important study on Northern slavery and collective memory.