



TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION THROUGH HERITAGE MANAGEMENT AND INTERPRETATION

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Overview: The Four Truths

In 1998, during the dismantling of the South Africa's apartheid system, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission developed the four notions of truth: factual truth, personal truth, social truth, and healing truth. Serving as a justice assembly, the Commission created these four notions as part of a societal healing process. By dividing and defining truth into four different sections, it helps recognize the various 'true' answers as different perspectives of the same story that make up one complete truth.

Factual Truth

We absorb factual truths in environments such as schools and universities. From the time students enter primary school to the time they receive a Ph.D., students around the world learn factual truths from professors and textbooks. We obtain facts such as one plus one equals two, that World War II ended in 1945, and that Barack Obama was the first African American president of the United States. Facts explain what happened, to whom, where, and when in a concise way. We don't think to question these truths because they are simply facts. But is a factual truth more truthful than a personal truth?

Personal Truth

In 2007, we had the opportunity to visit Robben Island, the prison camp that incarcerated Nelson Mandela for 27 years. This maximum-security prison held many Black political activists and leaders who encouraged resistance and destruction of the apartheid system. Now a World Heritage Site, this island has been turned into a major tourist destination located off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa. Our haunting and powerful tour was led by a former prisoner on the island. To hear his personal truth and experience as an African man in chains brought the site to life in an unforgettable way. Experience and trauma formed the basis of his message.

Social Truth

The 106 Group is honored to work with many Native American tribes including the Cherokee, Dakota, Ojibwe, and Akwesasne Mohawk. With homelands, history, and culture continuously being destroyed or suppressed by past and modern Western society, indigenous people fight to preserve their social truth in a world that has tried to make them invisible. By passing down oral stories within their communities, they have preserved aspects of their social truth. Now, as heritage managers, we have a responsibility to enable Native American people to share their history, stories, and traditional knowledge with the greater community, and nurture a dialogue that conveys the support, preservation, and respect that indigenous people deserve.

Healing Truth

Slavery and racism remain a very sensitive topic among Black and White people across America today. Slavery formed the foundation of the economic success of early America. Although this reality provokes pain and embarrassment for the American people in modern society, it is crucial that we never forget what we did in order to heal as a nation and take the stance of “never again”. Decades after the abolishment of this social structure, Blacks across the nation are still healing and dealing with the repercussion of their ancestors’ mistreatment. Slavery is America’s open wound—the painful injury that a third of America lives with and the rest of the country attempts to ignore. These discussions should no longer just be held within the affected community, but with those who may not understand, have been bystanders, or have chosen to ignore such truths.

Whose Truth?

We, as individuals, are convinced that our own explanation and perception of truth forms a valid, logical framework. We gain our knowledge of truth from what we experience first-hand, and from that of higher authority, such as professors and scientists. We also believe the truth stated in the context of our textbooks, as well as the news, and the literature that we consume in our day-to-day lives. But whose truth are we talking about? Whose narrative are we presenting?

Now that we have distinguished between four different types of truths, how does this apply to a heritage professional’s work in interpretation of places, history, and culture? Moreover, whose truth is being told? The remainder of this paper illustrates how the process of meaningful public engagement, equitable collaborations, and inclusive storytelling can begin to address the notion of truth and help find ways of healing historical traumas for two African American slave descendant communities and sites: first, at the historic retreat home of the third U.S. President, Thomas Jefferson, and second, for the African American urban community in St. Paul, Minnesota, which is located along the Mississippi River.

What is Interpretation?

Interpretation, at its heart, shares a message and tells a story. No matter what is being interpreted, it should always be grounded in authentic, meaningful truths and collaboration. First, before diving into interpretation, a strong foundation for interpretive planning requires understanding the unique needs of

the historic site or affected community. Once that foundation is established, great interpretation occurs when a community collaborates, gathers, and shares their diverse perspectives on the same topic to help create a more truthful and honest narrative.

Stakeholder input, site analysis, historical and audience research, both informal and formal, help create a stronger and more honest message; thereby providing an essential foundation to interpretive planning. Through public engagement processes, interpretive plans can develop a communication dynamic that breaks down barriers of mistrust and fear, and engages all stakeholders in a non-threatening, open, and transparent forum. Engaging individuals in the community also paves the way for continued stewardship and social inclusion.

The final step is to determine how the story will be conveyed to visitors, such as public programming, interpretive signage, technology, or immersive exhibits. Selection of appropriate methods to convey stories requires consideration of the different ways people consume information, as well as awareness of barriers, whether physical, educational, or cultural, that may prevent access to a museum, site, or community's resources. This discussion-based and culturally sensitive approach is essential for successful and meaningful storytelling.

Case Study 1: Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest

The Place

Thomas Jefferson, one of America's founding fathers and the third president of the U.S., owned a retreat home and plantation amongst the rolling hills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the state of Virginia. This retreat home, Poplar Forest, is located just shy of 80 miles from his primary home of Monticello, a well-known and visited World Heritage Site. Poplar Forest encompasses more than 4,800 acres and includes the main house, a service wing, privies, slave quarters, and an extensive historic landscape.

Archaeological remains enrich the landscape and reveal the stories of those who lived here. These stories consist not only of Jefferson and his grandchildren, but also the community of enslaved men, women, and children who lived and labored at Poplar Forest. By calling upon these resources to create well-conveyed interpretation, the story of Poplar Forest promises to bring the community together with a sense of our shared heritage; to attract local, national, and international visitors; and to inspire people across the nation and the world to consider their own pursuit of happiness, the foundational concept of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. Noting the downward trend in visitation and public support for historic houses, the Poplar Forest team realized that they too needed to build a stronger future. But how?

The Planning Process

Poplar Forest selected the 106 Group to develop a Master Interpretive Plan and new exhibits. Key to this process, we facilitated outreach with the local African American, slave-descendant community to build relevance and a sustainable future for the site. The team went to the stakeholders, transferred ownership and authority to community members, and facilitated safe forums for open expression on difficult topics. The inclusiveness of the planning and engagement work started Poplar Forest down a path of healing through enabling dialogue around all four concepts of truth. This holistic approach to community

engagement resulted in a new vision and reestablished Poplar Forest as a site of national importance that is both meaningful and engaging to visitors of all backgrounds. Poplar Forest now includes the whole story of the plantation – the presidential and the enslaved - into the site’s interpretation and exhibits.

Strategic Partnering

The process of identifying stakeholders from the community began with building robust institutional partnerships. Poplar Forest reached out to Lynchburg’s Legacy African American Museum (Legacy Museum) to partner on a workshop. The Legacy Museum invited leaders from the African American community, who provided local expertise and included Legacy Museum board members, a former mayor of Lynchburg, current and past presidents of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) local chapter, advocates from the Race & Racism Dialogue: Many Voices, One Community, and other community members.

Collaborative Planning

The first workshop provided a safe environment where participants discussed how Poplar Forest related to societal paradigms and racial divides born out of slavery. To encourage active participation and clarify key issues, the 106 Group facilitated small group discussions. Ground rules were established immediately to address potential conflicts and state that anger can be acceptable but within a framework of respect and honesty. During the group discussions, our team prompted conversations with questions about why Poplar Forest matters to them; what visitors should know about Thomas Jefferson and the plantation; how Poplar Forest should convey the story of slavery; and how the Poplar Forest site might have been different if it had been under African American leadership. The format of the questions helped participants focus their feedback through stories and experiences. Many participants had practical suggestions for integrating interpretation, while others were deeply reflective on the African American community's struggle, both historically and today.

Outcomes

Through the interpretive planning and active community engagement process, the four truths provided an informal framework for discussions. These conversations led to a more authentic, inviting, and rich experience for all community members planning for and ultimately visiting and working at Poplar Forest.

Factual Truth

Throughout the U.S., Thomas Jefferson is known as one of the great American presidents, a founding father, the third president, and a co-author of the Declaration of Independence, and remains a face on our currency today. He played a significant role in the creation of this nation and our concepts of freedom and democracy; that is the truth. But the fact that Thomas Jefferson was a massive slave owner is also a truth. But this fact has been absent from our textbooks. How should this fact alter the way we perceive him in history today?

The necessity for this information to be introduced in kindergarten through 12th grade reading and educational environments is crucial, as students always deserve to know the full truth. The history of Jefferson was inevitably recorded by White men during the 19th century, yet we all know that history has

been written by those in control. Curriculum should draw from the African American stories of resilience, resistance, and power that took place at Poplar Forest as well.

Although concerns arise when illustrating Thomas Jefferson as a slaveowner and pointing out the great irony that the author of the notion that “all men are created equal” was a slaveowner, this does not need to reduce his accomplishments as a founding father. However, a holistic view of his legacy that includes ownership of over hundreds of slaves and fathering children with an enslaved woman is vital and should be shared as a part of our nation’s history. Sharing the whole story shows respect towards the African American community and our ability as a society to be honest about our historical leaders and heroes. The stories of the slaves in the kitchen or in the fields at Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest are just as important to remember as the man writing his great works in the study upstairs in order to create an authentic and more meaningful view of American history. We should not be afraid to embrace these broader truths.

Personal Truth

Personal truths can be a powerful tool for interpretation and change the way we perceive basic facts of truth. For example, the fact that over 200 slaves worked at Poplar Forest will likely provoke less emotion compared to examining the story behind one of the slaves who lived and worked at Poplar Forest. By providing a personal story, visitors are more likely to connect to the hardships experienced. It creates empathy among audience members that might not have existed before arriving at Poplar Forest.

On November 15th, 1818, Hannah, one of Jefferson’s cooks, wrote a letter explaining the safe state of and care for his retreat home. She expressed her concerns for his poor health and missed presence at Poplar Forest. She ends her letter by stating, “...Master I doubt my ignorant letter will be much encouragement to you as know I am a poor ignorant creature, this leaves us all well adieu, I am your humble servant, Hannah” (Monticello Digital Classroom, 2019). Reading this personal letter makes the place and the people more real. When someone describe themselves as a “poor ignorant creature”, as Hannah does, it provokes empathy and forces readers to further question the social dynamic between Jefferson and Hannah.

Social Truth

The Poplar Forest team shared the evolving interpretation and stories in multiple ways throughout the site and community. At the site, exhibits are being redone, African American docents are actively encouraged, and interpretive training for long-term docents is active and ongoing. We’ve sought input from broader partners such as academics with topic expertise, and local businesses who use the site grounds for events. To further strengthen our credibility within the local community, we attended a service at Diamond Hill Baptist Church, an historical center during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, to provide a summary of Poplar Forest’s efforts to include the African American voice in the new interpretation. These seemingly small actions highlight the importance of sharing the new approach to interpretation with the greater community. By sharing this new process and these hidden stories, it helps address the social truths of Poplar Forest.

Healing Truth

The first step to healing truth is acknowledging that there are events in our past that are sensitive, heart-breaking, and angering to this day. Just because a truth makes us feel uncomfortable doesn't mean it shouldn't be shared. Acknowledging a painful truth in a respectful and open manner is important. To make the site relevant to a broader community, the uneven interpretation of slavery at Poplar Forest had to be addressed. By telling the whole story of the site, Poplar Forest not only becomes more authentic, but it draws in a larger, more diverse audience of tourists. During our work at Poplar Forest, we facilitated ways to begin and continue this dialogue. Additionally, the institution of Poplar Forest had to become more open and accepting to the healing truth of this site. Therefore, the administration put effort into staffing the interpretive programs, creating a diverse board of directors, and informing staff and volunteers of these difficult topics. Addressing healing truths can be a long process but, in the end, it can mend past wounds within the community and allow more visitors to have a more meaningful experience.

Case Study 2: African American Urban Community, St. Paul

The Place

St. Paul's African American community has long-established and storied roots. From the beginning, Blacks in Minnesota have had a tremendous impact on the state's economy, culture, and political development. Yet despite over 150 years of African American presence and involvement in St. Paul, documentation of this history has been inadequate to sufficiently identify and preserve sites of importance for the community.

The Aurora-Saint Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation (a neighborhood group) received a grant to develop an African American historical and cultural context, the first context focused on a non-European cultural group in the city. The context would be foundational to future heritage planning activities. The neighborhood group in Rondo, St. Paul's traditionally African American neighborhood, was well-established before the construction of a freeway, I-94, in the mid-1950s. That freeway divided the neighborhood by destroying its main thoroughfare—Rondo Avenue—along with hundreds of homes, institutions, and businesses, displacing thousands. Today, strong community cohesion persists, with annual celebrations, commemorative events, and new efforts in the works to carry on the community's cherished values and contributions.

The Planning Process

Historical contexts are integral to preservation planning. This context lays the groundwork for regulatory bodies to conduct preservation responsibilities more equitably, ensuring significant African American resources are protected with the same due diligence as historic assets of groups with European origins. The context can serve as a tool for the African American community to capitalize on the social and economic benefits of heritage preservation, advancing preservation of resources and the community's stories in the process. As a pilot project for the city, the methodology used to develop the context extended beyond archival research to incorporate extensive community dialogue and input. This

foundational, more comprehensive approach informs preservation priorities, identifies meaningful resources to the community, and addresses some of the inherent biases in preservation decisions.

This project's leadership consisted of an advisory group of over a dozen elders and other community leaders familiar with African American history and culture in St. Paul. Project planning included numerous Project Team meetings, Advisory Group meetings, and a community workshop. To ensure that places, people, and themes of importance were addressed, community workshop participants steered recommendations to include preserving and protecting community resources; collaborating and building community; educating, interpreting, and influencing policy; remedying losses; building local economies; and cultivating leadership and accountability.

Community Engagement

Engaging community leadership can be a powerful and effective path to meaningful identification, documentation, and evaluation of historic resources. The St. Paul African American Historical and Cultural Context brought together community leaders and members, along with technical experts, to support an accurate and meaningful history that meets professional standards and guidelines. This approach helped avoid the pitfall of professionals unfamiliar with a community's history and culture potentially missing key information just because it's not readily available in regular sources. As heritage professionals, we must acknowledge the unique expertise that communities themselves hold. For this historic context, we regularly communicated with stakeholders to ensure that the collective narrative being constructed was valid from their perspectives. This shared accountability ensured a productive, meaningful collaboration.

Outcomes

This cultural context study focused on a non-European cultural group and is the first of its kind in St. Paul. The report offers a solid foundation for preservation and heritage tourism of African American historic sites and provides tools to help promote African American cultural heritage for improved preservation practices and potential cultural tourism opportunities.

Factual Truth

One of the city's heritage preservation commissioners stated he was "...impressed by the phenomenal history within the context, and the emphasis on the breadth of the African American history - that this history is not just Rondo, but throughout the city and the state." By bringing these additional facts and layers of significance to light through the incorporation of community expertise into the heritage preservation process, we can expand recognition of the cultural resources significant to the community. We have the opportunity to right past wrongs, fill in previously invisible gaps, and peel back the layers of history – arguably the most exciting and meaningful aspect of the work we do. As historian Na Li said, "historic narratives are by nature selective...understanding what and why we choose to forget is as revealing as what we choose to remember" (Li 2011).

Personal Truth

As personal stories and truths have emerged due to this urban community context, there has been an increase in positive community feedback and desire to be involved in future preservation planning activities. Community members commented that the “intergenerational participation [at the workshop] was great”, that the “passion for this [project] is visible, positive, and nourishing”, and that it “feels like we are gaining traction”. Acknowledgement of our history often creates a sense of pride and respect of self, and this is a story that deserves to be acknowledged.

Social Truth

The community itself had the opportunity to take control of its own history and resources by attending community workshops and joining Advisory Group-led processes. Having ownership of one’s social truth is a very powerful experience for a community as well as an incredible opportunity and resource for the planners involved. Historical and cultural awareness within the Rondo community and throughout the city is increasing due to good planning, interpretive exhibits, and historical documentation. With the local African Americans gaining control of their own stories, preservation of African American historic sites and promotion of African American cultural and heritage tourism will continue to rebuild this vibrant community.

Healing Truth

Today, the African American community is starting to be heard. Finally gaining the attention that the community deserves, this historical and cultural context has helped identify a history that for too long has been ignored and misunderstood. This new recognition and understanding of the Rondo history is informing redesign of the existing freeway that did so much damage, impacting funding decisions at city hall, forcing policy makers and administrators to revisit existing practices for heritage site management, and so much more. By exploring, re-interpreting, and collaboratively sharing a community’s history, people from all sides can think about ways to change things that can be changed, thereby promoting community healing.

Conclusion

Truth must be at the heart of all our work, whatever our profession. Applying the four notions of truth (factual, personal, social, and healing truth) should form the fiber of our efforts as heritage professionals. To interpret heritage places appropriately, we must cultivate an understanding of the facts, concerns, and experiences – i.e. the truths - held by the communities with whom we work. Accounting for these multiple truths through dialogue and healing, can lead to more valuable outcomes for heritage management, and in our management plans, interpretive exhibits, and visitor experiences. Both Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest and the St. Paul’s African American Urban Community case studies show how meaningful public engagement, equitable collaborations, and inclusive storytelling have sought ways of healing historical traumas.

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