14

"Monticello is a Black Space"

The Getting Word Project and the Future of African American History at Monticello

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Monticello is located on the unceded territory of the Monacan Nation. In its current form, the land also reflects the labor and capital produced by hundreds of enslaved people. I acknowledge and respect the contributions of both groups in stewarding this historic landscape.

It is late morning on a sunny and hot August day in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. A group of cousins has gathered outside of the Kenwood House at the International Center for Jefferson Studies at Monticello. After exchanging warm hugs, catching up, and taking a few quick flicks to remember the moment, the family walked inside the library and took their seats for a public presentation (Figure 14.1). They are descendants of the men, women, and children who were once enslaved by Thomas Jefferson and the other slaveholders who worked or resided at Monticello. On this day, descendants have come to hear one of their own, Andrew Mitchell Davenport, present his research on the Getting Word African American Oral History Project. Getting Word was launched in 1993 because of the foundation's renewed commitment to gain insight into Monticello's history from the descendants of the hundreds of enslaved human beings who labored on this land. Andrew Davenport consulted with the founders of the project, archaeologists, archivists, historians, tour guides, members of the public, and his extended family to collect research over the previous four weeks as part of a fellowship with the International Center. At noon, Davenport, a descendant of Monticello's enslaved cook and brewer Peter Hemings, began his presentation by making an emphatic statement of reclamation: "Monticello is a Black space."[1]

FIGURE 14.1
Descendants Gayle Jessup White and Andrew Davenport stand together at the International Center for Jefferson Studies for Andrew Davenport's talk on August 8, 2017. Photograph by Niya Bates.

Davenport learned of his family's connection to Monticello in the same way that many of us with enslaved ancestors learn about our own families' deepest and most fascinating stories—through oral history. Andrew was first contacted by his cousin, Gayle Jessup White, a year earlier while she was researching her own family's ties to Monticello. White had received a copy of her family tree and shared it with Davenport, who recognized his great-great-grandfather's name. They discovered that they share an ancestor in Peter Hemings through his daughter Sally Hemings Robinson, who was named after his younger and more famous sister Sally Hemings. White and Davenport then worked with the Getting Word Project's founder, Cinder Stanton, and other Getting Word staff to compare their family's genealogy against other known information about the Hemingses. Even though the extended Hemings family is one of Monticello's largest and best-documented enslaved families, White and Davenport's research has uncovered new information about their ancestors—information that historians would not have found without the generosity of descendants sharing their knowledge, memories, and family records. The process

is the same for all new participants in the project. For all families that were enslaved at Monticello, which includes the Colberts, Hemings, Hughes, Grangers, Gillettes, and Herns among others, each new detail learned during an oral history interview or research session is recorded in the project's research files and used to continue the search for more descendants and to recover more information about the enslaved. The narratives that have emerged are grounded in Black family and community knowledge combined with that of scholars.

The stories that descendants have shared with the project reclaim Monticello as a Black space by challenging segregationist notions of life at Monticello. As a result of the Lost Cause and other historically revisionist projects that elided white Americans' responsibility for the violence of slavery and minimized the roles that racism and white supremacy played in the founding of this country, modern audiences have come to see plantations as segregated spaces in reality and in memory. For them, the main house was the domain of Thomas Jefferson and his white family, while everything in the basement or outside was the purview of those enslaved. In turn, house museums across the country responded by creating separate but unequal programmatic offerings, with slavery tours and programs offered as secondary or marginal experiences to whatever version of the "great man, original architecture, pretty furniture" tour that was billed as the main event. However, white and Black bodies and narratives have always been closely intertwined at plantations like Monticello. By relaying stories of their ancestors living and working in the house and on the land, recalling close interpersonal relationships between free white and enslaved Black residents, highlighting the genius of their ancestors' skills and talents, and challenging overly simplistic interpretations of the racial and social dynamics within the plantation, the descendants' oral histories foreground the interconnectedness of people, ideas, and histories at Monticello.

Monticello did not arrive at this moment spontaneously through a singular discovery or sudden revelation, but rather through the slow, decades-long process of engaging a diverse community of descendants who are scattered far and wide from Monticello. The ongoing work is the result of years of carefully and deliberately building trust and goodwill with the descendant community. Engaging descendants of enslaved communities at a place like Monticello, with all the hero worship and patriotic baggage that comes along with being a presidential house museum sparks an onslaught of questions for descendants, staff, and the public. Those questions are not unique to Monticello, however, and are rooted in our country's fraught histories of colonialism, enslavement, and racism. As such, descendants were skeptical of Monticello's intentions when they were initially contacted, and they questioned Monticello's sincerity. Why should descendants trust Monticello and the museum's staff with their oral histories? Would Monticello profit from their stories? Who would control the narratives? Would Monticello consider reparations for the generations of harm experienced by their families? Staff asked similar questions. Why should Black Americans trust Monticello? Would descendants recall information about the experiences of their enslaved ancestors after five, six, and seven generations? What other perspectives could descendants of the enslaved communities lend to the interpretation of Monticello and Jefferson? How many living descendants are there? The visiting public, an audience that in the early 1990s was mostly white, older, and

wealthier, questioned why Monticello needed to engage slavery more significantly at all. Monticello's work with descendants raises as many questions as it answers. The work of descendents has also prompted much-needed introspection into the ethics of engaging communities that were impacted by slavery and that continue to be affected by its legacies.

Although the Thomas Jefferson Foundation has owned and operated the plantation as a house museum since 1923, slavery has not always been a prominent part of the interpreted history—though conversations about slavery and race were never fully absent either. Four decades ago, when Monticello's archaeology team first began a systematic survey process to study the landscape of slavery, Monticello became one of the first presidential house museums to substantively engage with the topic. Other similar historic sites, such as Colonial Williamsburg, Stagville, and Somerset, were also at the forefront of the turn toward interpreting the history of slavery and including stories about enslaved people in public programs and tours.[2] Stagville and Somerset began working with their respective African American descendant communities in the 1970s and 1980s, and they were already holding gatherings by the time historian Lucia "Cinder" Stanton founded the Getting Word African American Oral History Project at Monticello in 1993.

Stanton was a senior historian at the Thomas Jefferson Foundation and spent the early part of her career transcribing Jefferson's voluminous plantation records.[3] Those records contained substantial information about the enslaved community, including birth and death dates, names, nuclear family groups, rations, living arrangements, and labor assignments. However, the archives only contained scant contributions from enslaved laborers who lived on and worked Jefferson's plantations in the Virginia counties of Albemarle, Amherst, Cumberland, Bedford, Goochland, James City, and Rockbridge (Figures 14.2 and 14.3). At Monticello, Thomas Jefferson enslaved over four hundred human beings and hired out dozens more from plantations in the surrounding area. Other slaveholders at Monticello included Jefferson's daughters and their families, overseers, visitors, and hired free white workmen. Jefferson died in 1826, and Monticello continued to be a working plantation with a handful of different owners until race-based chattel slavery was officially abolished by the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Following the Civil War, descendants of some of the enslaved families who were previously held in bondage by Thomas Jefferson and other owners and overseers of Monticello were employed there as tour guides, gatekeepers, and groundskeepers—some even lived on site until the 1950s. Thus, when we speak about Monticello and enslaved families, we must be aware that the enslaved community was never a stationary body of people, but instead a series of communities that ebbed and flowed, expanded and contracted, and constantly reconstituted themselves along with changing financial and social conditions, new owners, new overseers, and visitors at Monticello.

When Cinder Stanton began her research, it became clear that the museum needed to do more to record this history and to find more information about the enslaved community. In the years since its inception, Getting Word has grown to include interviews with just over 225 descendants of at least thirty-four different African American families. From 2016 until 2020, I served as director of the Getting Word Project, and as a native of Charlottesville, I came with deep connections of my own to some members

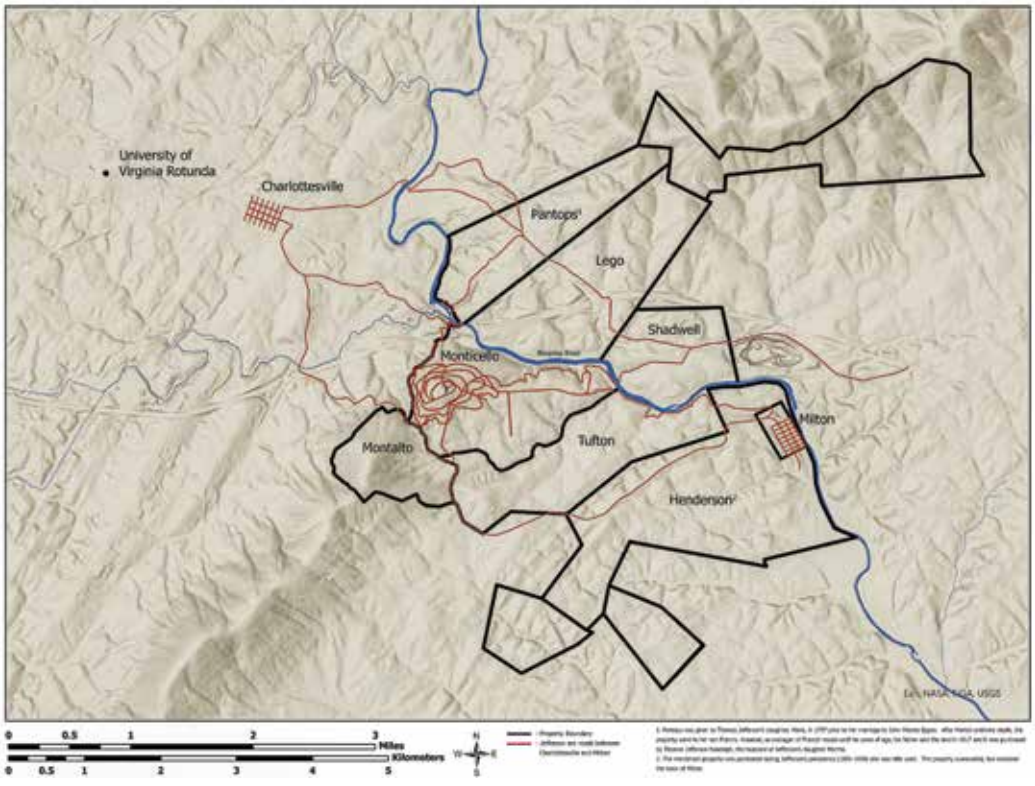


FIGURE 14.2
Map of the Monticello plantation and the Shadwell, Tufton, and Lego quarter farms. © Derek Wheeler, Department of Archaeology, Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello.

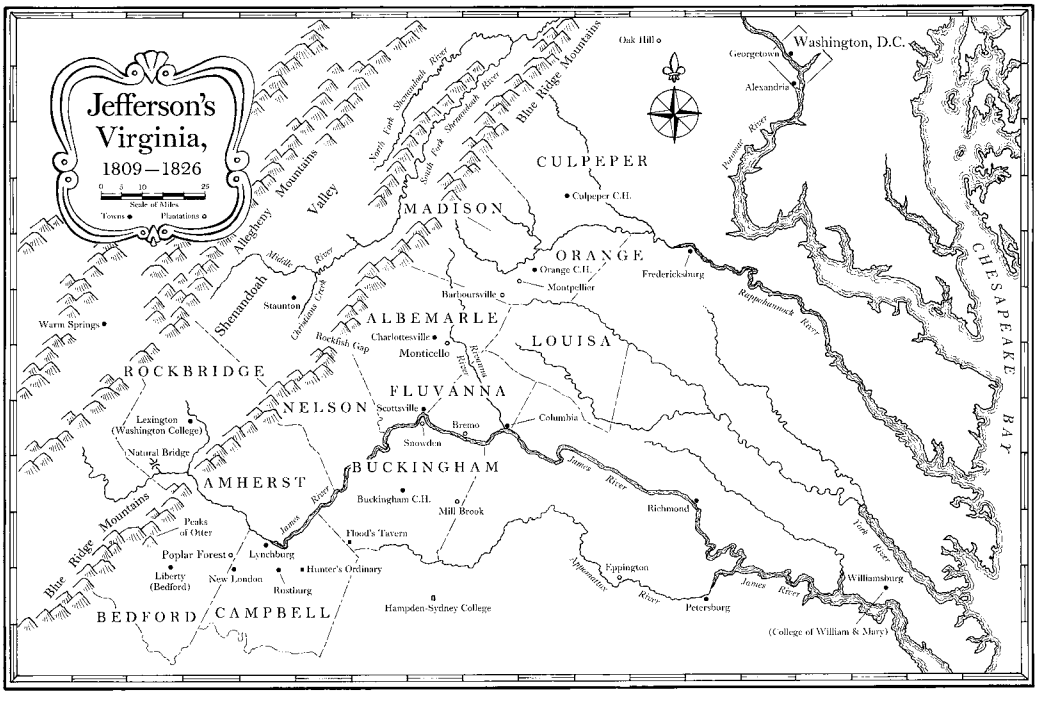


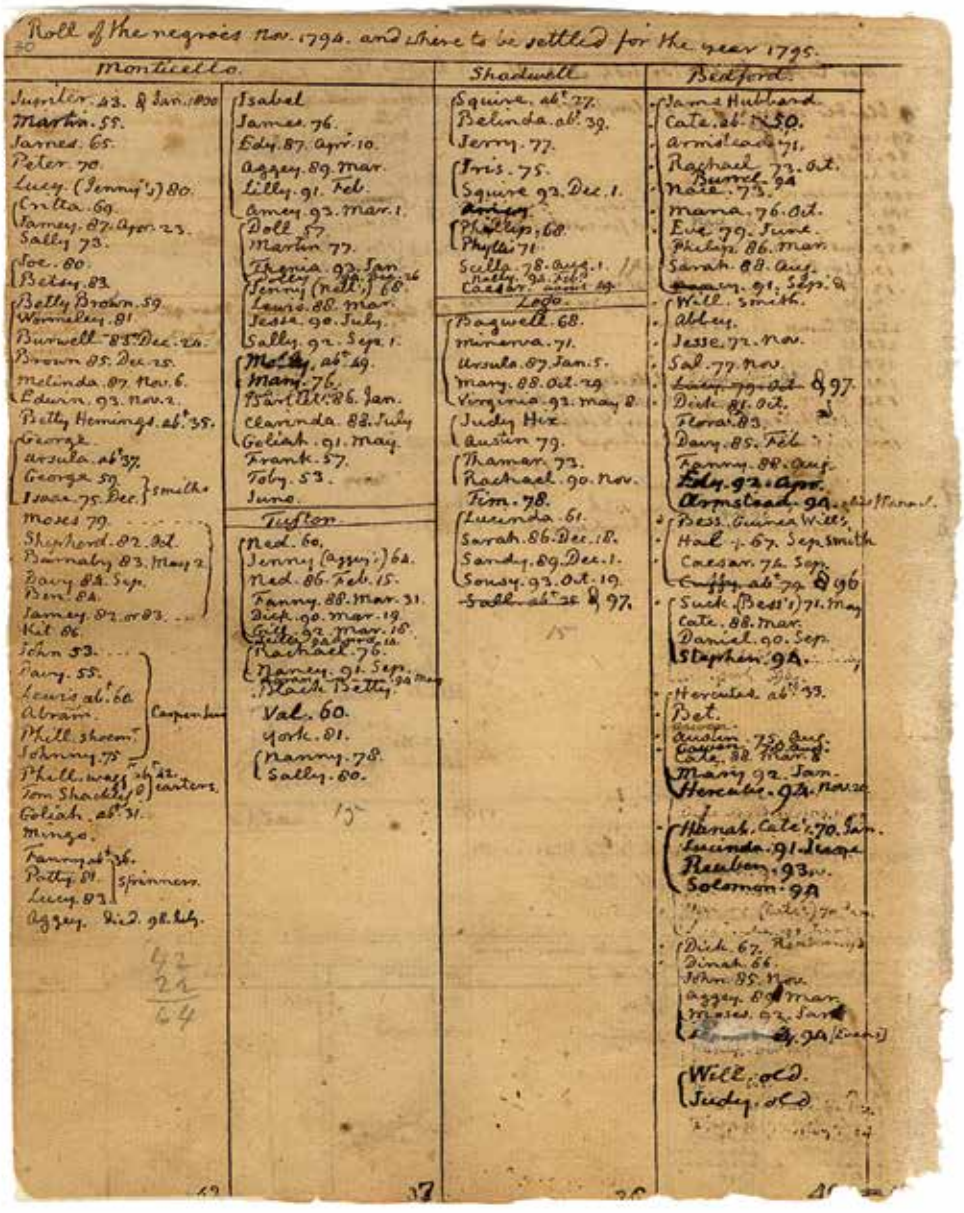
FIGURE 14.3
Map of Thomas Jefferson's Virginia. © Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello.

of Monticello's descendant community. They are parents of my childhood friends, people I see in church on Sundays, teachers, community leaders, and even members of my own extended family. As such, Monticello and Thomas Jefferson loomed large over my childhood. I visited Monticello countless times for school field trips and everything in town was named for Jefferson or members of his family—it truly was "Jefferson country."

But growing up, none of the Black people I knew ever mentioned their connections to Monticello or Thomas Jefferson—or at least, that I can remember—like comedians from Key & Peele and 30 Rock have done in their made-for-tv skits.[4] The people I knew shared a collective hesitancy to publicly claim Monticello as their own or as part of their families' pasts. But this reluctancy to associate with Monticello did not and does not extend to all members of the descendant community, especially for the families who did not grow up in the immediate shadow of Monticello. When I became the director of the Getting Word Project, I learned many descendants were excited to talk about their ancestral ties to Monticello. No matter their proclivity toward or against Monticello or Jefferson, descendants universally encouraged me (and other historians) to see the plantation as a living, five-thousand-acre archive of the lives of their ancestors—the hundreds of enslaved people who once inhabited the mountaintop and its included quarter farms of Shadwell, Lego, and Tufton. Monticello and the broader territory was and is a Black landscape.

For most of its history, Black Americans were the largest resident population at Monticello. From the beginning of construction at Monticello in the 1760s until well after the end of slavery in the United States, Black individuals and families were permanent residents on the Monticello mountaintop. In the 1790s, during the height of construction and industrial activity at Monticello, there were 117 enslaved people and only 23 free white residents (Figure 14.4).[5] There are Black families who lived at Monticello longer than Thomas Jefferson or any other owner or overseer of the property. As such, narratives from descendants serve not as counternarratives but rather as thick descriptions of their lived realities.[6] From this perspective, Monticello is a Black space. While this may sound like a radical or revelatory claim, calling Monticello a Black space is both historical fact and liberatory praxis. It is true that Monticello had a large Black enslaved population with their own claims to the space. It is also true that calling Monticello a Black space is an act of resistance that counters two centuries worth of historiography that has given one white man and his family almost total dominion over the history of what was once a sprawling plantation inhabited by a very large community of Black people. This discursive shift, much like Nikole Hannah-Jones' work with the 1619 Project, asks readers to question who has the authority to claim space, control narratives, and shape our collective memory about slavery and the Founding era.[7] Calling Monticello a Black space elevates its Black residents to the level of historical actors who participated in the founding of America and refutes segregationist approaches to talking about American history by recovering Black voices and perspectives that were systematically excluded in the formation of white, patriarchal narratives of Monticello's past.

Reclaiming Monticello as a Black space serves several important purposes for multiple communities and audiences. Beyond being a historically Black space by virtue of its demographics, Monticello's landscape was literally shaped by the manual labor of a highly


Roll of the negroes Nov. 1794. and where to be settled for the year 1795.

Monticello.

Jupiter. 43. & Son. 1800
Martin. 55.
James. 65.
Peter. 70.
Lucy. (Jenny's) 80.
Critta. 69.
Jamey. 87. Apr. 23.
Sally 73.
Joe. 80.
Betsey. 83.
Betty Brown. 59.
Wormeley. 81.
Burwell. 85. Dec. 24.
Brown 85. Dec. 25.
Melinda. 87. Nov. 6.
Edwin. 93. Nov. 2.
Betty Hemings. ab.t 58.
George.
Ursula. ab.t 37.
George 59.
Isaac. 75. Dec.
} Smiths
Moses 79.
Shepherd. 82. Jul.
Barnaby 83. May 2
Davy 84. Sep.
Ben. 84.
Jamey. 82. or 83.
Kit 86.
John 53.
Davy. 55.
Lewis ab.t 60
Abram.
Phill. sheem.t
Johnny. 75.
} Coopers
Phill. wagg.r ab.t 52.
Tom Shackley 70
} Carters.
Goliah. ab.t 51.
Mingo.
Fanny ab.t 36.
Patty. 81.
Lucy. 87.
} Spinners.
Aggey. Died. 98. July.

Isabel
James. 76.
Edy. 87. Apr. 10.
Aggey. 89. Mar.
Lilly. 91. Feb.
Amey. 93. Mar. 1.
Doll 57.
Martin 77.
Thenia. 92. Jan.
Lilly (natt.) 66.
Lewis. 88. Mar.
Jessie. 90. July.
Sally. 92. Sept. 1.
Molly. ab.t 59.
Mary. 76.
Bartlett. 86. Jan.
Clarinda. 88. July
Goliah. 91. May.
Frank. 57.
Toby. 53.
Juno.

Tufton

Ned. 60.
Jenny (Aggey's) 62.
Ned. 86. Feb. 15.
Fanny. 88. Mar. 31.
Dick. 90. Mar. 19.
Lilly 92. Mar. 16.
Rachael 76.
Nancy. 91. Sep.
Patty. 93. May
Val. 60.
York. 81.
Nanny. 78.
Sally. 80.

Shadwell

Squire. ab.t 77.
Belinda. ab.t 39.
Jerry. 77.
Iris. 75.
Squire 93. Dec. 1.
Phillip. 68.
Phylla 71.
Scilla. 78. Aug. 1.
Caesar. 49.

Lego.

Bagwell. 68.
Minerva. 71.
Ursula. 87. Jan. 5.
Mary. 88. Oct. 29.
Virginia. 92. May 8.
Judy Hix.
Austin 79.
Thamar. 72.
Rachael. 90. Nov.
Tim. 78.
Lucinda. 61.
Sarah. 86. Dec. 18.
Sandy. 89. Dec. 1.
Sonsy. 93. Oct. 19.
Sally ab.t 28 & 97.

Bedford.

James Hubbard
Cate. ab.t 50.
armistead 71.
Raphael 73. Oct.
Burrel 94
Nace. 73.
Mana. 76. Oct.
Eve. 79. June.
Phelix. 86. Mar.
Sarah. 88. Aug.
Mary. 91. Sept. 9
Will. Smith.
Abby.
Jesse. 72. Nov.
Sal. 77. Nov.
Lucy 79. Oct. & 97.
Dick. 81. Oct.
Flora. 83.
Davy. 85. Feb.
Fanny. 89. Aug.
Lilly. 92. Apr.
Armstead. 94.
Bess. Guinea Will's
Hal. 67. Sep. Smith
Caesar. 74. Sep.
Cuffy. ab.t 72. & 96
Suck. (Bess's) 71. May
Cate. 88. Mar.
Daniel. 90. Sep.
Stephen. 94.
Hercules. ab.t 33.
Bet.
Austin. 75. Aug.
Gowin. 90. Aug.
Cate. 88. Mar. 8
Mary 92. Jan.
Hercules. 94. Nov.
Hannah. Cate's. 70. Jan.
Lucinda. 91. Sept.
Reuben. 93. Nov.
Solomon. 94.
Dick. 67.
Dinah. 66.
John. 85. Nov.
Aggey. 89. Mar.
Moses. 92. Jan.
94.
Will. old.
Judy. old.

FIGURE 14.4
November 1794 "roll of Negroes," from *Farm Book, 1774–1824*, in Thomas Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson Papers: An Electronic Archive* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2003).

skilled enslaved workforce who did everything from leveling Monticello's iconic west lawn to carving out the terraced gardens that flank the plantation's main street, Mulberry Row. Enslaved builders executed each one of Thomas Jefferson's architectural designs, taking his sketches from conceptual designs to fully engineered masterpieces that have earned Monticello recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site on the merits of its architectural style. Calling Monticello a Black space honors their contributions, intellectual and otherwise, and creates a space for descendants, the public, and scholars to connect with and explore Black material culture on plantations beyond the slave houses and workspaces.

Thomas Jefferson grew up in a Black space, surrounded by Black men, women, and children and having his every need and want supplied by them or their labor. There is no doubt that the Black communities at Shadwell, in Williamsburg, in Richmond, and at Monticello influenced his ideas and writings about freedom, citizenship, and democracy. Yet these historical and intellectual realities have been overlooked and undervalued by historians, preservationists, and interpretive staff until relatively recently. Enslaved people had their own beliefs and ideas that emanated from their experiences of slavery, and they deeply influenced the writings of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, and the other slaveholding authors of our nation's governing documents. The dissonance visitors feel when confronted by this reality is part of the biggest challenge for the research and interpretive staff at Monticello. It is easy for guests to understand Monticello as a Black space in literal and historical terms, but it is far more challenging to make the leap to conceiving of it as Black space metaphorically and intellectually. This can likely be attributed to the role of race in the historical interpretation of slavery, whether it be the incomplete and heavily biased nature of slavery archives or how Black Americans have been excluded from narrating the history of slavery at historic sites like Monticello.

Furthermore, framing plantations as Black spaces opens the potential for a redistribution of their "historic capital," a concept borrowed from the field of historic preservation that describes the accumulation of social and monetary capital produced by identifying and remaking historic places.[8] For far too long, Black Americans have been written out of or underrepresented as participants in the founding of this country. Exploring Monticello and Jefferson from the vantage point of Black Americans shifts the geography of memory. Afro-Virginians and their descendants had their own worldviews and ideas about freedom that were not articulated in the nation's founding documents but were instead born of their unique experiences in slavery. Thus, reclaiming Monticello as a Black space enables the rediscovery and recognition of Black worldviews and epistemologies.[9] Secondly, this critical lens is a natural entry point for understanding the worlds that Black Americans created for themselves during and after slavery. Who was part of their networks? How did they sustain kinship and social ties beyond the physical boundaries of the plantation? What does the diaspora from this plantation look like?

This approach to the history of the site began with the Getting Word African American Oral History project, and so the argument for Monticello as a Black space starts with the project and its place within the timeline of slavery interpretation at Monticello, considering how narratives of slavery, African American history, and race are interpreted at Monticello. Then, I explore significant ways that the project has grounded interpretation at Monticello. As Monticello approaches its centennial as a museum, and as the Getting Word Project moves toward its 30th anniversary, both in 2023, the nation is moving toward a significant anniversary of its own—namely, the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 2026. These anniversaries present an opportunity to assess how we are engaging our past and what future we hope to build by reckoning with some of the most challenging and horrific elements of that history. Through a clear-eyed reckoning with the worst parts of who we are as a people and as a country, we can begin to repair and resolve the legacies of slavery that still negatively impact American society in the present.

Throughout my research and descendant engagement work at Monticello, I use the terms "descendant" and "descendant community" to refer exclusively to the descendants of enslaved Afro-Virginians who were tasked with building and maintaining Monticello and other plantations in Virginia. As a research-oriented project, Getting Word has created a welcoming space for grappling with slavery and race within the larger discourse on American history and identity. However, despite the role the project might play in racial reconciliation between white and Black descendant groups, this is not one of the primary goals of the project in the ways that it is for organizations like Coming to the Table and Descendants Truth & Reconciliation Foundation.[10] Getting Word is designed to center the African American families at Monticello, and it serves as an institutional home for research on slavery and Black life in early Virginia. Most participants in Getting Word have at least one direct enslaved ancestor, but the project has also benefitted from the participation of white informant interviewees who could provide information about enslaved individuals and families that was not recorded in plantation records. Jefferson's white descendants through his daughters, Martha Jefferson Randolph and Maria Eppes, have their own family group called the Monticello Association, which is an independent organization that is separate from the nonprofit Thomas Jefferson Foundation that has owned and operated the museum since 1923. The Monticello Association holds annual gatherings and has its own process for vetting membership and demonstrating lineal descent from Thomas Jefferson. They retain ownership of the Jefferson family cemetery located on the Monticello mountaintop. There are also descendants of the free white workmen and overseers who lived at Monticello throughout its time as a working plantation who are neither part of the Getting Word descendant community nor the Monticello Association. The complexities of working within this racialized cultural space reflect just how segregated America's public memory of slavery was and continues to be.

As a second note on methodology, drawing upon the work of Katherine McKittrick and others, I have frequently used the word "traditional" to denote when I am describing perspectives, practices, and discourses that are white, patriarchal, Eurocentric, heteronormative, and classed.[11] Postcolonial theory emerged in academic programs in the 1980s along with other humanistic disciplines such as African American studies, gender studies, and critical race theory.[12] A core aim of postcolonial studies is to examine enduring forms of colonialism and Eurocentrism to understand how they govern the production of knowledge about the past and the present. Colonialism resulted in global sociocultural, economic, and political systems that privileged elites, the West, and great men. Postcolonial theory and decolonization movements reoriented the scholarship toward women, marginalized people, Indigenous cultures, and the Global South.[13] In the past ten years, postcolonial studies and decolonization movements have grown in popularity with public-facing historians working as museum professionals, historic preservationists, librarians, archivists, and academics.

Against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter movement's outcry against police violence and systemic racism, humanitarian crises impacting migrant communities at our borders, and ongoing disputes over Indigenous lands and natural resources, calls for decolonization have taken on new fervor in public discourse about museums. Activists are

calling upon museums to return stolen artifacts to their home countries; a new generation of museum professionals are rallying behind diversity and inclusion efforts within their institutions, encouraging an involvement in discussions about how museums respond to contemporary social, environmental, and humanitarian injustices.[14] The American Alliance of Museums, National Council for Public History, American Association for State and Local History, American Historical Association, and other national professional organizations have begun hosting programs and panels on the topic of decolonizing the museum and what that means for the field. Despite a frenzy of energy at the national level, postcolonial theory and the decolonization movement have been slow to alter the interpretation of one of the United States' darkest historical periods at house museums, sites of enslavement, and plantation sites across the country.

At Monticello, the added specter of the events of the Summer of Hate in 2017, which included white supremacist neo-Nazis chanting racial epithets and threats while attacking a group of students and professors at the base of a Thomas Jefferson statue at the University of Virginia, acutely increased pressure to engage more fully *all* of Jefferson's legacies. Monticello has responded aptly by hosting several large public summits and gatherings about race and slavery and training guides to interpret those topics in all their tours (Figure 14.5). The commemorative landscape of slavery is changing swiftly, and all museums need to learn to adapt. Across the board, plantation interpretation has not kept pace with evolving scholarship and increasing demands for more open and truthful representations of the nation's history of enslavement, especially when that demand requires centering communities of color instead of dead white men. Because of the pioneering and profoundly important Getting Word Project, Monticello's Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery, and Monticello's unique position as the only plantation in the United States currently designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Monticello has a responsibility to lead the field in interpreting slavery. The second half of this essay explores how Monticello has developed alternative narratives of the site and its history; it concludes by highlighting opportunities for improvement and growth.

Participants in the Getting Word African American Oral History Project taught me how to understand Monticello as their ancestral home and as a place that represents pain and despair as much as it represents their families' resistance, resilience, and survival. With descendants, I have experienced Monticello at midnight on a summer night when it was too hot to stay inside the small, reconstructed slave quarters. The August humidity hung heavily in the air, hushed our conversations, and forced us to be still as we sat in the grass of the kitchen yard—a reminder that our enslaved ancestors worked through all sorts of environmental conditions without any of the modern conveniences that many people now enjoy without a second thought. I have been there with descendants at dawn when the air was crystal clear on the mountaintop, and slow-rolling fog steamed up along the bottom of the hillsides toward the Rivanna River and settled above the low-ground (Figure 14.6). We have stood by that riverside on cold winter days and contemplated what higher winter water levels, and therefore easier navigation, may have meant to enslaved people who dreamt of one day using those waters to escape. We have explored Monticello's Tufton and Shadwell quarter farms where most of the enslaved communities lived, the

FIGURE 14.5
Melody Barnes moderates a discussion with descendants J. Calvin Jefferson and Diana Redman and historians Beverly Gray and Lucia "Cinder" Stanton at Monticello in June 2018. © Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello.

wooded hillsides down from the mountaintop that their ancestors would have known as open fields, and the other remote corners of the plantation with archaeologists to learn how to unearth artifacts that were last touched by their enslaved ancestors before they were deposited in the earth. I watched as descendants learned West African dances from a local dance troupe during a sun-drenched golden hour next to the South Wing (Figure 14.7). By the campfire with facilitators from the Slave Dwelling Project, I have listened as descendants reflected on what it must have been like for their families to occupy those same spaces. The following morning, I observed as younger members of the descendant community processed the dissonance between what they were taught in school about slavery and what they encountered when they visited Monticello.

Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small's seminal work *Representations of Slavery*: *Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* suggests that plantation museums in the American South have largely adhered to a framework of "white-centric exhibition" that commits the following three interpretive offenses with respect to interpreting slavery: annihilation, or leaving slavery out of the narrative entirely; trivialization, where slavery assumes a marginal position in comparison to that of the enslaver and planter culture; and segregation, where slavery is offered, but not as part of the main tour or programs.[15] Eichstedt and Small suggest that African American–led institutions present counternarratives to mainstream interpretations of slavery that center the enslaver and slaveholding society.[16] However, the Getting Word Project occupies a liminal space as an institution within an institution. It is a physical, spiritual, and symbolic Black space within an institution and historiography that has privileged whiteness and Anglo-centric narratives about America's founding and its founders.[17] Getting Word offers more than just counternarratives.

FIGURE 14.6 Fog rising from the Rivanna River in the trees below the restored horse stable on Mulberry Row at Monticello in August 2019. Photograph by Niya Bates.

FIGURE 14.7 Getting Word Project participants dancing with Chihamba at Monticello in September 2016. © Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello.

The Getting Word African American Oral History Project archive is itself a site of thick description, contested memory, and liberatory praxis; the Getting Word Project is a Black space. A liberatory praxis is an attempt to critically recover the possibilities of history against a discourse and narrative arc dominated by the slaveholder and his or her posterity to the point of total silence and erasure of contending perspectives of the those who were enslaved.[18] The descendant community carries within their oral traditions alternative epistemologies for grappling with contested histories at Monticello and beyond. Their ways of knowing, seeing, and being fill archival gaps and challenge hegemonic ideas about enslaved people and their descendants. Descendant narratives present opportunities to engage and understand kinship and community in ways that contest notions of dislocation, dispossession, separation, and geographic fixity that dominate misrepresentations and under-representations of slavery and its profound implications for America—past and present.

For generations, Jefferson's Randolph and Eppes descendants, a predominantly white cohort of historians, and a majority white visiting audience, have all unevenly benefitted from controlling narratives about Monticello and Thomas Jefferson. Enslaved families were first denied the ability to participate in shaping the narrative by virtue of the gross realities of enslavement and again through being excluded in the construction of Monticello and slavery in public memory. Reclaiming Monticello as a Black space in memory, in the ways Andrew Davenport, Gayle Jessup White, and many descendants already have, is the first analytical strategy used to reframe Monticello as more than the architectural biography of Thomas Jefferson.

Monticello has been a leader in expanding historical interpretation to include slavery. The Getting Word African American Oral History Project and the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery (DAACS) are two of the most productive and powerful research projects aimed at decolonizing the research and interpretation of slavery in the country. Staff at Monticello began a serious effort to research enslaved communities in the 1980s, under then president and chief executive officer Daniel P. Jordan. In 1993, as part of the festivities celebrating the 250th anniversary of Thomas Jefferson's birth, senior historian Lucia "Cinder" Stanton founded the Getting Word African American Oral History Project to collect oral histories from direct descendants of hundreds of enslaved laborers who lived and worked at Monticello. Her initial goal was to find out if direct descendants still carried memories of their ancestors. Stanton was responding to archival and historiographical gaps in information about the enslaved families at Monticello—some of those gaps created by racially segregated ways of creating and viewing the archives.

At the time, Monticello knew everything and nothing about the enslaved people who shaped its monumental architecture, moved the earth to reshape its physical landscapes, and carved out their own existences under the oppressive forces of slavery. Thomas Jefferson and his family members kept detailed plantation management records that provided names of enslaved people, descriptions of labor and assigned tasks, geographic information, and some family genealogy, but that could not speak to the lived experiences of those men, women, and children. Archaeological excavations have revealed locations of slave quarters, overseers' houses, discarded housewares, and some details about

the private lives of enslaved people. However, enslaved people authored very few of their own recollections of slavery at Monticello and, until that point, no one had reached out to their descendants to see if any oral history of life at Monticello still survived after two centuries. There are just four memoirs from enslaved people at Monticello, all written by men who were skilled tradesmen and had access to literacy.[19] Their names were Isaac Granger, Madison Hemings, Israel Gillette Jefferson, and Peter Fossett.[20]

From the beginning, Stanton knew where the gaps were and sought to fill them with interviews. Stanton figured out early on that she would need to build trust and credibility with the descendant community for the interviews to be useful. Why would they want to work with historians from Monticello after everything that their ancestors went through? Would they trust a white woman with their family's stories? How could her team avoid the kind of racialized stereotypes that so many other scholars have identified within the New Deal–era Works Progress Administration's collection of slave narratives?[21] Cinder Stanton partnered with two Black women who played integral roles in the project by building trust and tapping into their deep networks to establish a foundation for Getting Word. The first was the late Dianne Swann-Wright, a Virginia historian with a background in African American history and folkways. Swann-Wright, whose own family is from Buckingham County, Virginia, was adept at building relationships with descendants. She made participants feel comfortable in interviews by asking questions that prompted them to walk through scenes from their pasts, share their processes of discovering their family histories, and fill the Getting Word archive with humor and life through their light-hearted asides. She was also an incredible educator who trained Monticello's guide staff to incorporate details learned from descendants into Monticello's house and slavery tours. Next, Cinder Stanton sought out Ohio-based genealogy researcher and historian, Beverly Gray, who had already begun researching the branches of the Hemings family that left Virginia to settle in the free state of Ohio in the years before slavery officially ended in 1865. Together, the trio traveled over forty thousand miles, retracing Monticello's diaspora and following leads to living descendants of as many enslaved families as they could. In the twenty-eight years since its inception, Getting Word has revealed new information about slavery on the plantation and helped recover thirty-four surnames of families of people largely only cataloged in Jefferson's hand by first names and diminutives.[22] Just as important, Getting Word has animated stories of life *beyond* Monticello by documenting the breadth of the African American experience from slavery to freedom, as well as the outward diaspora of people from Monticello to Liberia, Alabama, California, and other far-reaching parts of the globe.

While Getting Word is ideally a comprehensive archive, there are still limits to what it can capture. The strength of the descendant relationships forged through the Getting Word Project is a testament to the time and care that Cinder Stanton, Beverly Gray, and the late Dianne Swann-Wright put into creating real connections, trust, and a community-oriented spirit. They created a project that enables a powerful retelling of the history of Monticello from the point of view of descendants of enslaved Afro-Virginians centered around African American history and culture. Voids, silences, and violence in the traditional archives of slavery have led other scholars who research enslaved communities to employ more speculative approaches in their work. For example, in "Venus in Two Acts,"

historian Saidiya Hartman details how she leverages speculation to avoid recreating the violence and harm contained in casual descriptions of the molestations and brutalities that captive women experienced aboard slave ships. She describes the archive of enslaved women's lives as a tomb, a death sentence, an inventory of property, a display of the violated body, and ultimately "an asterisk in the grand narrative of history."[23] Through speculative frameworks, Hartman is able to translate words left unsaid, refashion disfigured lives, and redress the violence of the archive.[24] More importantly, she accesses a space in between what Stephanie Smallwood and Ira Berlin have identified as the social and corporeal death experienced by captive men and women who became slaves in the New World and birthed African American culture.[25] Descendants rescued the histories of their enslaved ancestors at Monticello from this same archival void by sharing their realities and speculations—their speculative contributions grasp for the most interior aspects of how their enslaved ancestors may have felt and thought.

Monticello's response to the limitations of oral history and the archives has been to leverage aggregate data about slavery, in qualitative and quantitative forms. Through slave narratives and oral histories from generations of descendants, Getting Word provides qualitative data about the lived experiences of people enslaved by Jefferson and others at Monticello. Early in the life of the Getting Word Project, historians located five recollections from formerly enslaved people with knowledge about slavery at Monticello. Four of the five had been enslaved at Monticello and the fifth, Fountain Hughes, was a grandson of a Monticello's head gardener Wormley Hughes. Despite the somewhat recent rediscovery of these recollections and memoirs, all of them have been publicly available for over a century—though, as historian Annette Gordon-Reed has observed, African American voices were systematically dismissed by white historians due to widely held prejudices about enslaved Africans and their descendants.[26] Nonetheless, their memories of Monticello provide a rare glimpse into the lives of some of the people who lived and worked in the main house and around the mountaintop. The recollections recount interior aspects of Black life at Monticello that are not documented in Jefferson's *Farm Book,* family letters, or correspondences. Based on those five accounts, participants in the oral history project frequently remark on observed personality traits that are common within different family lines—whether they are creative types, have a particular affinity for gardening or cooking, or are defiant and stubborn like their Monticello ancestors who ran away or otherwise resisted slavery. By centering Black voices in this way, Getting Word endeavors to decolonize the archive by interjecting Black voices into critical dialogues on what Jefferson was like as slaveholder, on the legitimacy of Jefferson's paternity of Sally Hemings' children, and on the pervasive violence of everyday life on a plantation.

In other areas of research, Monticello has relied on the quantitative powers of comparative analysis to compensate for other missing details within the archive. Monticello's archaeology department founded the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery (DAACS) in 2000 to pioneer an artifact cataloging process and database that would create the necessary level of standardization to enable comparative analysis across plantation sites in the Chesapeake, Carolinas, and the Caribbean.[27] After creating DAACS, the archaeology team built partnerships with over two dozen universities and

museums throughout those study regions to train other archaeologists and students to use the system. Through this research, DAACS has allowed scholars to picture how material culture differed across sites of enslavement, to analyze how enslaved people participated in markets from Virginia to Jamaica, and to examine how the material lives of enslaved people in Virginia evolved over time and compared with other regions.

Despite our best efforts, some dissonance remains between what is captured in the Getting Word Project archives and archaeological research in DAACS and what is presented on public tours. Black audiences, descendants included, do not want to visit plantations like Monticello if they are not treated as sacred and reverent spaces, particularly when that lack of reverence is accompanied by revisiting the trauma of slavery. Plantations are part of America's "dark tourism," a phrase historian Tiya Miles uses to describe the growing economic exploitation of the specter of slavery that is connected to a twenty-first century turn toward tourism that foregrounds America's appetite for mortality, violence, atrocity, and suffering as economic drivers of the tourism industry.[28] For Black visitors, tourism to plantations is akin to pilgrimages to civil rights museums and survivors sojourns to Holocaust sites to mourn the lost and to reflect upon their own survival. Some, like Grammy-award winning songstress Jill Scott, experience feelings of disgust, anger, revenge, and disappointment.[29] Others express a sense of healing through returning to the places where their ancestors were enslaved. Getting Word participant Betty Ann Fitch recalls that her great grandmother, Mary Elizabeth Henderson Fitch, who was born enslaved at Monticello in 1856, tearfully told her of "the beauty of Monticello" and the simultaneous wickedness of slavery. Descendant oral histories offer much-needed connective tissue to help visitors relate to information that often contests what they have come to expect at museums like Monticello.

Mrs. Fitch's oral history also demonstrates the powerful connections to place that descendants have. Her family was one of the last enslaved families to leave Monticello. Her second great grandfather, Willis Shelton, was a gatekeeper at Monticello in the years after slavery ended. A visitor account describes Shelton taking admission's fees at the entry gate in the late 1880s, well before Monticello officially opened as a museum. Members of the Coleman, Henderson, Shelton, and Tolliver families stayed at Monticello as paid staff until the 1950s. Their descendants speak about the plantation through oral histories, as well as from their own memories of visiting Monticello and having family gatherings in the small gate house located just off Route 53 near the present-day entrance to Monticello. For them, the connection to Monticello transcended the traumas their family experienced during and after slavery. The sprawling cultural landscapes and power of place are other avenues that Getting Word could explore more intentionally.

Toni Morrison describes the connection to physical spaces and geography very aptly in "The Site of Memory." Morrison believed that both people and landscapes have memories that can be used to "fill in and complement" the primary evidence that survives related to enslaved people.[30] She writes: "You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. 'Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering.

Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was."[31]

In *Pedagogies of Crossing*, M. Jacqui Alexander takes this analysis further by exploring the concepts of healing, capture, memory, and polarized forgetting. She writes: "African cosmologies are complex manifestations of the geographies of crossing and dislocation."[32] Whereas Morrison elevated the landscape to the level of historical actor with its own memory, Alexander highlights the spiritual and cosmological connection that humans have to physical spaces even when absent or dislocated from that space. Many participants in Getting Word have expressed a sense of genetic memory of their ancestors' experiences in slavery at Monticello. Descendants of Monticello chefs Peter Hemings, Frances Gillette Hern, and Edith Hern Fossett describe recipes and an affinity for cooking. Descendants of the rebellious Hubbard and Fossett families frequently speak of their own revolutionary spirits and long family histories of freedom fighting. Descendants of Monticello's head enslaved gardener, Wormley Hughes, recall many members of their families taking joy and pride in growing bountiful gardens, many of them eagerly volunteering for opportunities to make their own mark on Monticello's historic landscapes (Figure 14.8). Thus, the study of the spiritual and cosmological beliefs of enslaved people is an area that would greatly enhance the ways Monticello and other museums interpret enslaved people by transcending the dehumanization that reduced enslaved beings to objects of labor, violence, and commodity.

To tell a more truthful and, in turn, more complicated narrative, it is imperative to acknowledge that descendants of Monticello's enslaved communities have a substantive authorial claim to Monticello's history and memory. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century realities of ownership aside, it is quite literally their home, and for most the earliest known point of origins for their families. As such, descendant oral histories inherently engage with the contradictions of our nation's founding era by being doubly conscious of how their own and their ancestors' experiences compare with the universal American virtues as we understand them to be articulated by the men who wrote the founding documents that still govern our collective ideals. Descendants are lightyears ahead of museum professionals on this front, and foregrounding their attempts to reconcile these conflicts could bring the museum and the visiting public closer to a place of reckoning with slavery and its enduring legacies.

Imagining Monticello as a Black space allows us to consider the worlds enslaved people created beyond the white gaze and beyond the traditional archive. Getting Word has reconnected branches of families that were separated generations ago by sale, gift, or manumission. Oral histories color the kaleidoscope of information about the enslaved community and quite literally populate the mountaintop with Black people and their stories. Recollections from descendants retain intergenerational connections to this place. Through narratives of escape, emigration, sale and separation, and resistance, descendant interviews offer new possibilities for grappling with the environmental and spatial history of the Black experience at Monticello. Reconstructing the kinship and social networks of enslaved people at Monticello illustrates how Black communities in central Virginia

FIGURE 14.8
Descendants of Monticello's enslaved families plant a mulberry tree during a re-dedication ceremony in May 2015. © Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello.

forged their own connections across plantation geographies, county lines, and even state and national borders. Their stories also demonstrate the interconnectedness of plantation life. Descendant communities from plantations across the state of Virginia often overlap because of ways that Virginia's white enslaver families intermarried and forged alliances to concentrate their power and control of vast amounts of people, land, and wealth.

Mapping these networks could enable historians to interrogate the social, cultural, and intellectual diasporas of this plantation and others, and possibly identify people whose surnames remain unknown. In *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*, Steven Hahn shows that prior to emancipation, when their only legally recognized relationships were to their owners, slaves relied upon "generational and spatial" kinship networks among themselves as a source of collective power imbued with cultural, social, and political meanings.[33] Kinship and relational networks between plantations could span entire neighborhoods and regions based on the status and mobility of the plantation owners. The worlds of enslaved people are best understood within their geographical and spatial contexts. Practically speaking, it means that to fully understand Monticello's enslaved communities, and their attendant diasporas, one must also research and study the free and enslaved communities within the surrounding areas and all frequently visited destinations.

During its life as an active plantation and in the decades that followed, Monticello was a Black space by virtue of its demographics, the impact of enslaved labor upon the landscape and in the construction of buildings and structures, and in the lived experiences of hundreds of enslaved people. Despite the extended networks that connected Monticello's enslaved families to the world beyond the geographic limits of Monticello,

historians have largely treated the experiences of the enslaved community as particular to Monticello and part of Jefferson's world. Furthermore, where they have been discussed, they have not been truly centered within the discourse. Even scholarship that has greatly enhanced our understandings of slavery at Monticello, like Annette Gordon-Reed's *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*, generally focuses on those enslaved people who lived and worked closest to the main house and neglects those who labored in the fields and at distance from the main house. Details of enslaved people who lived within the sphere of the main house and its occupants have been easiest to glean from the documentary record without relying upon the slow and steady progress of archaeological survey work. However, this has meant that the record is skewed toward members of the Hemings extended family and skilled tradesmen and tradeswomen within the enslaved community. Descendant oral histories from the women and men not working in trusted positions within the Monticello main house and without access to literacy—those families living at the Tufton, Shadwell, and Lego quarter farms of the Monticello plantation or separated from each other and sent to the family's other properties—have been a lifeline for learning about Monticello's agricultural laborers.

Monticello's five thousand acres of forests, fields, buried artifacts, and the Rivanna River are what bridges the gap between enslaved people, who were barely understood through the jobs they held and spaces that they occupied, and the living community of descendants. Enslaved people's networks and constructed world extended beyond Monticello to include nearby plantations, family seats of Jefferson's extended family, and plantations owned by Monticello's frequent visitors, as well as cities and towns including Richmond, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Charlottesville, Paris, and everywhere else that sent visitors to and received travelers from Monticello. Thus, there is vast field of geographic and environmental studies of Monticello's enslaved families that have yet to be conducted. There are, however, great examples from within academia where this intellectual work is already being done well for other sites of enslavement—for example, Kathryn Benjamin Golden's studies on insurgent ecologies of the Great Dismal Swamp, which could serve as inspiration for new scholarship about slavery at Monticello.[34]

Katherine McKittrick's book *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006) and article "Plantation Futures" (2013) construct a genealogy of themes and ideas that originated from Black and Black feminist theorizations of the plantation. In the book, she cites *Kindred* (Octavia Butler), *The Black Atlantic* (Paul Gilroy), *Poetics of Landscape* (Edouard Glissant), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Harriet Jacobs), and the writings of Caribbean theorist Sylvia Wynter to investigate the interplay between geographies of domination to open the up the discursive potential of more humanly workable geographies. She defines landscapes of domination as plantations, slave ships, and Black women's geographies, and subsequently encourages scholars to read those landscapes and racial economies as *also* geographies of resistance.[35] By doing this, it is possible to more effectively counter the processes of erasure and dispossession that Eichstedt, Small, and Brooms identified in their studies of museums. McKittrick sketches out an analytical approach that constructs Black subjects, particularly Black women, as producers of their own spaces and cartographers of their own maps who create self-determined worlds.

It is important to note that McKittrick's concept of resistance extends beyond everyday acts of resistance and rebellion, which are already well interpreted at many historic sites. When applied to public history sites, McKittrick's approach encourages public historians to engage with a multidimensional and multivocal past and further counters attempts to segregate the constructed memory of slavery from that of broader American history. Drawing from this work to think about Monticello as a Black landscape would afford a different methodology and vocabulary for interpreting enslaved women's histories at Monticello in ways that center the women who worked primarily in agricultural roles and whose lives have largely escaped any formal interpretation thus far.

J. T. Roane, in his formulation of the plotting the Black commons, which also evokes Sylvia Wynter's exploration of subsistence plots cultivated by enslaved people, further develops the idea of autonomous Black geographies under slavery.[36] Through the plot and the act of plotting or mapping, Roane explores the distinctive and furtive Black geographies that rivaled, threatened, and challenged white infrastructures of commodification and control. "Plotting the Black commons" provides a framework for recovering Black epistemologies that are an imprecation to "capitalist enclosure and mastery."[37] Plotting and mapping, as key tools for documenting Black material culture, are essential to shifting the interpretive landscape of slavery. Andrea Roberts, who maps Black freedom colonies in Texas; Jobie Hill, whose Saving Slave Houses project maps extant slave quarters and work spaces; Robert Churchill, who maps geographies of violence and capture along the Underground Railroad; and Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, who maps geographies of resistance in free Black communities along the Underground Railroad, have all embraced the power of mapping to identify previously overlooked landscapes and to chart new geographies for understanding the interior lives of enslaved and free Black communities.[38] Mapping these and other self-determined landscapes like that of the Underground Railroad, the free communities of color, and the political and social networks of enslaved people beyond the boundaries of individual plantations could bring new questions and perspectives into historic interpretation practices by breaking down the isolated, exceptional, and parochial versions of slavery and enslavement that are presented at many historic sites. This work provides a new vocabulary for articulating the experiences of Black bodies in space and place that at Monticello would enhance our understanding of the world enslaved people created outside of the white gaze. The approach also extends the plantation beyond house museums and sites traditionally controlled by wealthy, white benefactors, which is a key strategy for re-allocating the historic capital at Monticello and adjacent landscapes of enslavement.

One of the most notable examples of the potential for examining geographic networks within the Getting Word Project archives is captured in the journey of the Colbert family. Betty Brown, one of the first members of the Hemings family to come to Monticello and the one of the last to leave after Jefferson's death, had eight children. Of those, six used the surname Colbert. One of her sons, Brown Colbert, was a nail maker; in 1805, he asked Jefferson to sell him so that he could be with his wife on another plantation. Brown Colbert and his wife, Mary, continued to live in slavery in Lexington, Virginia, until 1833, when they took a leap of faith and moved to Liberia with two of their five children through the

American Colonization Society. Until then, the Colberts had remained in contact with their family members who still lived at Monticello. Although the Colbert family's gamble ended with half of the family dying of a malarial fever upon arrival in Africa, their son Burwell Colbert lived long enough to be counted on Liberia's first census ten years later.[39] In 2016, Liberian descendants of the Colbert family came to Monticello to reconnect with descendants of Brown and Mary's children, who had remained enslaved in Virginia. In both lines of the family, descendants served in the military, held political office, and worked as civil rights activists, and both branches had been drawn back to Monticello by an inarticulable urge to reconnect with their roots. The Colbert descendants in Liberia even brought back evidence of a family tradition of quilt making, which was not previously known to take place at Monticello, despite several women at Monticello being known for their sewing skills (Figure 14.9). Thus, following the story of this family brings to the fore narratives of generational connections to place, diasporic reach of Monticello's enslaved communities, Black cosmology, and more.

American plantations are landscapes of contested memories, where distinct and often conflicting discourses compete for commemorative position and power.[40] Considering Monticello a Black space is a liberatory praxis aimed at critically recovering African American history from the annihilation and misrepresentation that Eichstedt and Small identified.[41] Political histories of the African American Freedom struggle almost universally emphasize the ways in which social norms within the Black community have stressed participation and mutuality over hierarchical and individualistic organizational patterns.[42] Getting Word's aspirational goal to engage all enslaved families equally resists the impulse to highlight exceptional stories of enslaved individuals or families over the experiences of the masses. It also resists the dehumanizing practice of only studying enslaved people as laborers and workers within an exploitative agricultural and industrial system.

Through a liberatory praxis, it is possible to not only refute the idea of "social death," a status characterized by total alienation and a lack of any recognized legitimate social ties, but to insist that enslaved Afro-Virginians and their descendants created insurgent spaces of resistance, joy, and freedom within systems that failed and continue to fail to break them.[43] After slavery, when millions of Black Americans were "turned out like cattle" without clothing, jobs, homes, or any other resources, they began to pick up the pieces by reconstructing and reconstituting their families and preserving their own communal history through oral history, placemaking, memorial ceremonies like Juneteenth and Decoration Day, and newly invented social and cultural traditions.[44] For one Monticello family, this meant serving as tour guides for the first three decades that the landscape and house was open to the public as a museum. Willis Henderson and eight others entertained and educated visitors with stories about Monticello that were informed by the oral histories passed down in their own families. Their descendants remain invested in how the history of Monticello is presented to the public, and have made a yet unfulfilled demand that there be an exhibition about Monticello's first Black guide staff. The focus on the service of the family to the history of the place is made even more potent in the family photos of Black leisure and joy at Monticello, where descendants beam with the quiet resistance of insisting that they belong and that they have a claim to this space as their own. This may be

FIGURE 14.9
Colbert descendant Nancy Anna Freeman-Wordsworth and a quilt in Careysburg, Liberia. © Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello.

the most profound re-shaping of the narrative of the place and its community. Although the closing photograph in this essay is not from their rich collection, it captures the same spirit (Figure 14.10).

Labeled simply as "Uncle Peter," the ca. 1889 photograph shows an aged Black man, with glasses, a neat white beard, and a cane, wearing a light-colored vest over a ruffled shirt covered by loose-fitting suit jacket, seated on a bench along Mulberry Row with the stone textile workshop in the background. Who is Uncle Peter? Scholars at the University of Virginia speculate that the man could be Peter Briggs, a man who had been enslaved at the school and was well-known for having his mouth agape in photographs.[45] Given that the man's facial structure, glasses, and stature differ in significant ways from other photographs of Peter Briggs, I do not believe he is the man shown on Mulberry Row. Uncle Peter's posture asserts a comfort and familiarity with Monticello that someone born and raised there would have possessed. Could it be Reverend Peter Fossett, who

FIGURE 14.10
"Uncle Peter," a Black man seated on a bench in front of the stone textile workshop on the south side of Mulberry Row at Monticello, ca.1889. Photograph by Rufus W. Holsinger.

had been born enslaved at Monticello and whose congregation paid for him to return for a visit in 1900 at the age of eighty-five? Could it be someone else, maybe someone who was not even named Peter? Willis Shelton, the gatekeeper discussed earlier in this essay, was described by a visitor in 1889 as an older man with white facial hair, a bald head, and a wrinkled face.[46] At any rate, the man in the image was welcomed to the mountaintop some thirty years before it would officially open as a museum, and he seemed to be somewhat pleased to be there, based upon the faint smile revealed in the fullness of his cheeks, peeking out from underneath his tidy facial hair. His presence on Mulberry Row and his choice to be photographed there, rather than in view of the iconic west or east fronts of Monticello, is in itself an act of resistance.

Monticello and other similar historic sites are part of an unfinished process of pursuing justice through museums, archives, public history, and memory. Because the process of colonization resulted in hierarchical ideas of race, sex, class, and gender, oppositional frameworks, like Black space, have been rendered necessary to create equity and balance.[47] Oppositional frameworks that pit Black history against mainstream hegemonic history, or segregate it as a separate field of study, have been necessary interventions to combat

the legacies of colonialism. Yet, the end-goal of this work is to create wholeness by bringing together seemingly divergent visions of who and what Monticello—and America by extrapolation—represents. Reframing Monticello as a Black space is an analytical and theoretical exercise that has the potential to move everyone connected to this history toward a place of reckoning and healing. The ultimate work of the Getting Word Oral History Project is to desegregate the memory of Monticello and to erase Anglo-centric historical narratives that have dominated its interpretation. In the next thirty years of the Getting Word Project at Monticello, I hope the project's staff continues to collaborate with descendants to expand the archive, to reclaim Monticello as a Black space in memory and in situ, and to recognize Black Americans as authors and stewards of the history of Monticello and other plantations.

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NOTES

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